In Defence of Trotskyism

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The Methodology of Communism

The United Front and the Anti-Imperialist United Front are tactics that apply at all times except when the direct uprising takes place for the seizure of power and the masses are flocking to the revolutionary banner; in a sense it is wrong to characterise the UF as a tactic at all because it is the methodology of communism, its very mode of existence, its orientation to the global working class as a whole class, the only method that can mobilise that force that alone can overthrow capitalism.

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Unity is strength, L'union fait la force, La unión hace la fuerza, Η ενότητα είναι δύναμη, اتحاد قدرت است, đoàn kết là sức mạnh, Jedność jest siła, ykseys on kesto, ሃይማኖት ክፍፍል ነው, Midnimo iyo waa awood, hundeb ydy chryfder, Einheit ist Stärke, एकता शक्ति है, единстве наша сила, vienybės jėga, bashkimi ben fuqine, אחדות היא כוח, unità è la resistenza, 団結は力だ, A união faz a força, eining er styrkur, De eenheid is de sterkte, الوحدة هو القوة, Ní neart go chur le céile, pagkakaisa ay kalakasan, jednota is sila, 일성은 이다 힘 힘, Workers of the World Unite!

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Reprints of selected documents of the Leninist-Trotskyist Tendency with a new preface for them all by the Socialist Fight Group.

The Leninist-Trotskyist Tendency (LTT) was the result of the 1991 fusion of the Leninist-Trotskyist Tendency of Belgium and Germany, the Workers International League of Britain (which emerged from the collapse of Gerry Healy's WRP) and a group of South African Trotskyists.

Other groups to join the LTT included the Comrades for a Workers Government (South Africa), Workers Voice (Sri Lanka), the Leninist-Trotskyist Group (Canada) and the Swedish Arbetarförbundet för Socialismen (AfS – Workers League for Socialism).

The LTT included former members of a number of Trotskyist tendencies, such as Gerry Healy's International Committee, the United Secretariat, the Spartacist tendency, the Revolutionary Workers Party (Sri Lanka) and the Moreno-Lambert Parity Committee.

The LTT fell apart soon after the dissolution of the Workers International League in 1997.

[The LTT is not to be confused with the tendency of the same name that was established by the US Socialist Workers Party and its co-thinkers in the United Secretariat of the Fourth International in 1973].

A large section of the documents can be found on the site of the Encyclopedia of Trotskyism On Line at. http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/ltt/

New Preface by Gerry Downing May 2013

The Socialist Fight Group republishes these selected documents of the Leninist-Trotskyist Tendency/ Workers International League because we acknowledge their continuing relevance to the struggle to build a revolutionary current which seeks to relate to the whole working class and to win a vanguard to revolutionary politics in preparation for coming struggles.

However despite the strength of Revolutionaries and the Labour Party its weakness is that the WIL itself increasingly tended to make entry work in the Labour party less of a tactic and more of a strategy as the years wore on until it finally recruited some deep entrist from the ISG which swamped its revolutionary character by their reformist Labourism.

Revolutionaries must neither capitulate to reformism when entrists by proclaiming that the Labour party can become the vehicle to introduce socialism as the original CPGB, Healy, Grant and Matgamna did nor adopt the opposite side of the same coin by proclaiming that the Labour party no longer has any relationship to the working class and must be denounced as simply bourgeois and the revolution (or at least their own current) can be advanced by self-proclamation and increasingly manic revolutionary verbiage as the CPGB, Healy, Taaffe and Matgamna did/ do when in their 'open party' phase.

These documents by the LTT are amongst the best on the question of the United Front we have seen but yet there is a problem with them all. They do not fully appreciate the centrality of the question. This is shown in the final paragraphs of the document *What is the Anti-Imperialist United Front and should we fight for it?* where they pose the following question, *'A tactic or a strategy? Would it cause too many problems to call it a 'long-term tactic' or a tactic with strategic implications, or maybe something else entirely?'*

The United Front is neither a tactic nor a strategy, it is a question of methodology, it is the way that communist must operate in all their work because it is the way to get closer to and win leadership of the masses via their natural vanguard thrown up in struggle, both domestically and internationally. This approach then eliminates the handwringing at the end of *What is the Anti-Imperialist United Front and should we fight for it?*

'Without wanting to contradict the central argument of this document, does this struggle for working class leadership in the struggle against imperialism not share some of the characteristics of the united front? Do we not maintain the political independence of the working class? Do we not march separately and strike together? Do we not aim to break the non-proletarian oppressed from their own political misleaders? Do we not realise that the only way, to begin with, to relate to those we want to win is through their organisations? Do we not also realise that around concrete issues we will be working together with these misleaders, in order to demonstrate to their base the practical superiority of our programme and method, but also, if possible to win that base to it?'

In the same article it correctly tackles the old RIL/ITC because whereas the WIL tended to make the UF a tactic the RIL/ ITC tended to make it a strategy so they can correctly criticise them in the following terms, 'This is the argument of the International Trotskyist Committee (ITC). It is misconceived in that it adds to the general confusion on the AIUF, and is bound up with the ITC's false understanding of united fronts as party fronts operating at a high level of programmatic agreement, but at least it sees that there is a problem here which needs to be resolved.'

Ramsey McDonald, despite the gross class treachery of the Labour leader Trotsky never abandoned the Comintern's United Front method of calling for a class vote for Labour against the direct representatives of the ruling class, the Tories.

And of course if the WIL/LTT collapsed because of its failure to penetrate the masses due to a (relative) sectarian approach to the UF because they regarded it too much as simply a tactic the RIL/ITC collapsed because of they regarded it (relatively) too much as a strategy and so substituted front organisations for the revolutionary party and international. All that remains of their perspective of world revolution is the UK Movement for Justice and the US *Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration & Immigrant Rights* with no public face for revolutionary Trotskyism, which operates like a secret Masonic lodge within these fronts. What were initially small errors of emphasis and characterisation grew in time under the pressure of the neo-liberal offensive into gross and fatal errors.

We regard the interpretation of the Workers Power and FIT on the Anti-Imperialist United Front as basically historically correct. The LTT attack on the WP position is unconvincing,

'What the LRCI does is take two separate questions, the struggle waged by the proletariat for leadership of the other oppressed sectors and the notion of military action alongside the national bourgeoisie in the event of a struggle against imperialism, and lump them together as the united front. They thus perpetuate the previous theoretical confusion. The LRCI is quite unabashed about this. In a published polemic against the International Trotskyist Opposition (ITO), it says:

On the AIUF, for example, it is ND who is being scholastic. He believes that a bloc with the national bourgeoisie in certain circumstances is permissible, but it is not to be called the AIUF. He

is welcome to call it by any name he chooses. For us it involves unity in action against a common enemy with no mixing of banners and with the aim of breaking the masses from their misleaders. This is the method of the united front as spelt out by the healthy Comintern.
The LRCI appears to have lazily adopted the method of the fourth Comintern Congress, whose participants did not have the possibility of 70 years hindsight. To take the LRCI to task over this is not to be scholastic nor to play with words. Its formulation is just as ambiguous and confused as the 1922 version and, as Workers Power never tires of pointing out, ambiguous formulations have the potential to be concretised into wrong positions. In war or insurrection, confusion over common action or a united front with the national bourgeoisie can be a tragically expensive luxury.
If that attack was totally convincing whence the handwringing above where they admit that there are powerful arguments which "contradict the central argument of this document" but dismiss them so unconvincingly. The quotes from Trotsky on China are very selective; always those which stress the need for the class independence of the working class whilst ignoring those which stress the need to fight Imperialism. Here is Trotsky's polemic against the Eiffelites on China, 1937:
'In my declaration to the bourgeois press, I said that the duty of all the workers' organizations of China was to participate actively and in the front lines of the present war against Japan, without abandoning, for a single moment, their own program and independent activity. But that is "social patriotism!" the Eiffelites cry. It is capitulation to Chiang Kai-shek! It is the abandonment of the principle of the class struggle! Bolshevism preached revolutionary defeatism in the imperialist war.
Now, the war in Spain and the Sino-Japanese War are both imperialist wars. "Our position on the war in China is the same. The only salvation of the workers and peasants of China is to struggle independently against the two armies, against the Chinese army in the same manner as against the Japanese army.'
These four lines, taken from an Eiffelite document of September 10, 1937, suffice entirely for us to say: we are concerned here with either real traitors or complete imbeciles. But imbecility, raised to this degree, is equal to treason.'
This is not simply common action but clearly implies an element of political solidarity even with the regime itself in order to open the space to approach the masses loyal to the regime, for sound anti-imperialist reasons, with our own revolutionary programme. And both the RIL/ITC and the WIL/LTT (including the CWG in SA) advocated empirically many of the correct tactics that flow from the AIUF, like calling for a vote for Sinn Fein in Ireland and the ANC at particular times when they were still seriously struggling against Imperialism or when black majority rule was first established in 1994 in SA.
The analogy that the Comintern made with the United Front was correct, an element of political solidarity with Labour leaders and the Labour party (as a good example of bourgeois-workers parties internationally) is clearly implied against the Tories by calling for a class vote for them in order to open up the space for our political attacks on them. Or else we will be seen as hypocrites; how can we advocate a class vote for openly pro-imperialist parties who support attacks on Libya, Syria and Iran and not advocate votes for revolutionary movements in semi-colonial countries who are in mortal combat with the forces of Imperialism in Ireland and SA, for instance, despite their counter-revolutionary leader, who are fighting imperialism? Is that not the content of Trotsky's insistence that the duty of, "all the workers' organizations of China was to participate actively and in the front lines of the present war against Japan"? Those who charge the old LTT and the ITC of "crossing class lines" here are those referred to Trotsky above as "either real traitors or complete imbeciles".
In the same article the LTT also acknowledges that there were weighty political arguments put forward by opponents in South America:
'One relatively sophisticated argument for the AIUF came from the forces which at one time constituted the Fourth Internationalist Tendency (FIT), principally the Politica Obrera of Argentina and Guillermo Lora's Partido Obrero Revolucionario of Bolivia. The FIT regarded the Comintern position as healthy and made a clear distinction between the notion of worker-peasant parties and the Stalinist 'Anti-Imperialist Front', and the AIUF which can only start from the proletarian political leadership of the national majority (peasants, the majority of the urban middle class) . . . it concerns a tactic, which starts from the tangible interests of the masses, designed to convert the working class into the national leader… The question [which] concerns us is knowing which social class will politically head the national minority…'
As regards work in the Labour party revolutionaries must have a strategic orientation to the mass reformist parties of the working class in all circumstances. Whether or not revolutionaries conduct entry work in the British Labour party or in any reformist Social Democratic and Stalinist/Maoist parties where they have a mass base in the working class is a tactical question and not a strategic one. But it is a question of such tactical importance that Lenin sought to reorientate the young Communist Party towards entry in the Labour party by the characterising it as a 'bourgeois-workers party' and Trotsky said that:
'But it remains a fact that for every revolutionary organization in England its attitude to the masses and to the class is almost coincident with its attitude toward the Labour Party, which bases itself upon the trade unions. At this time the question whether to function inside the Labour Party or outside it is not a principled question, but a question of actual possibilities. *In any case, without a strong faction in the trade unions, and, consequently, in the Labour Party itself, the ILP is doomed to impotence even today. Yet, for a long period, the ILP attached much greater importance to the "united front" with the insignificant Communist party than to work in mass organizations. The leaders of the ILP consider the policy of the Opposition wing in the Labour Party incorrect out of considerations which are absolutely unexpected.'*

Trotsky, ILP and the Fourth International (1935)

Revolutionaries and the Labour party makes an important contribution to the question of the relationship to the Labour party. It contains a very useful short overview of the history of revolutionaries from Henry Hyndman's sectarian Social Democratic Federation of 1881 to Sean Matgamna's Socialist Organiser of 1982 who refused to defend Argentina against Thatcher's onslaught during the Malvinas War and who publicly campaigned for the Kinnochite witch hunter Peter Kilfoyle in 1991 against Militant's Leslie Mahmood. For a short period they ridiculously claimed the Labour party is a 'stinking corpse' as if Rosa Luxemburg's famous denunciation of the German Social Democracy was not made in a revolutionary situation where state power was within the grasp of the German working class. But now once more today's AWL are punting their wares within the Labour party. Such obvious confusion mongering is answered excellently by *Revolutionaries and the Labour party*.
The leaders of the WIL, which later became Workers Action, have succumbed to the same pressures they correctly claimed Matgamna's group had; 'Matgamna's group's stands as a particularly virulent example of how a move away from sectarianism can end up in opportunism towards the Labour bureaucracy'. The steady advance of the right in the Labour party and trade union bureaucracy, particularly after the fourth electoral defeat in 1992 and Blair's elevation to leadership after John Smith's death in 1994 took its toll on the WIL. It lost membership and took an increasingly sectarian attitude to other left groups. For instance this they failed to seriously pursue fusion talks with Workers Power or the Revolutionary Internationalist

League, both of whom had very similar positions on the Labour party, and with whom they were to have fusion talks or appeal to the membership over the heads of the leadership when these talks were scuppered by both WP and the RIL.

The WIL did not seriously intervene in the Socialist Labour party or in the Socialist Alliance at a time when the left in the Labour party was marginalised and a substantial section of the vanguard, independents as well as left groups, were attracted by these organisations. They took a similar position on the Scottish Socialist Party; but it was imperative for every serious revolutionary to intervene in that party with their revolutionary programme because it was possible to retain political independence. They correctly pointed out that the main orientation of the majority of these formations was to counterpose their own miniscule current to the Labour party in the left sectarian way of the third period Stalinists by declaring that the Labour party was no longer a bourgeois-workers party as the *Revolutionaries and the Labour party* had so well exposed. But it would still have been far better to fight within these groupings, forming partial alliances on tactical questions and appealing to the ranks of groups who at least had some orientation to Trotskyism and the Transitional method, rather than to vegetate in moribund Labour party CLPs.

It was in these new half-way-house formations, after all, that most of the subjectively revolutionaries had, however mistakenly, congregated and it was really important not simply to denounce them for not listening to the sensible WIL but to engage them where they were. A vanguard can dethatch itself from the class in a sectarian way and as long as we do not estimate them to be counterrevolutionary-through-and-through we are obliged to follow them at least some of the way, especially at a time when the class itself is relatively quiescent. The collapse of all these efforts and the debacle around the Respect split which has led to the current crisis in the SWP and Respect Renewal highlights the necessity to fight for these serious militants trapped in these groups to explain the history and mistakes of their organisations and seek to win recruits and splits to consistent Trotskyism.

But the most disastrous error of the WIL was its intervention into the ISG. Here the future WIL members of the left Faction A had made an alliance with the right Faction M by secret conspiratorial negotiations directly before a conference, overturned its leadership (GD who produced the theoretical documents on which the Tendency was based) and its theoretical basis to seize control of the organisation. They had hypocritically voted to do the exact opposite in a Tendency meeting a few days previously when the conspiracy must have been well advanced. It was an act of gross political opportunism which disenfranchised many Tendency A members who were not in the loop. Naturally it confused and destroyed the left in the ISG, or more correct moved the whole organisation to the right so its new left was now much further to the right and moreover without any principles. The excuse for this opportunist bloc was the supposed common positions on a 'labour movement orientation'. In reality the centre Tendency led by AT was considering placing less emphasis in working in an increasingly hostile milieu in the Labour party and was opting for more open work, not an unreasonable position which did however demand revolutionary politics which the ISG central leadership had progressively abandoned since 1982.

In fact they adapted to the traditional Pabloite 'movementism' and now declare they stand on three equal principles, ecologism, feminism and socialism with a corresponding tri-colour representing this 'republic' Green, Purple and red! And of course the left and right 'labour movement orientations' were not the same; this hid a range of serious political differences. The political collapse of the left soon became apparent and AT and others had little difficulty in exposing it as a rotten bloc. They then decamped to the WIL and one (a central conspirator) declaring his exit was on 'no political basis' thereby forcing RP to write his resignation letter for him. The WIL leadership uncritically welcomed these new recruits with no political accounting, demonstrating their own increasing opportunism and contributing to a rightward shift in two organisations.

RP however continued to produce good analyses of the ultra-leftist build-your-own-labour-movement currents which repeated all the old Third Period Stalinist errors; see *Another Marxism is Possible* where RP responds to Mike McNair's critique of Graham Bash and Andrew Fisher's *100 Years of Labour* (*Weekly Worker* 16 November 2006), *Communists and the Labour party 1927-29: a sense of déja vu,* RP WA Number 17- Summer 2002 *and the reprint of Class against Class; Extract from the Communist Party of Great Britain's programme for the 1929 general election. We might also add J. T. Murphy Growth of Social-Fascism in Britain*; *The Communist Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 1930.

But RP could no longer produce serious attacks on opportunist currents, he no led on himself and was part of a reformist and demoralised group so there was no emphasis on developing their revolutionary consciousness and with an increasing contemptuous attitude to the rest of the left, becoming almost as bad as in the old Healyite WRP. It was never going to be possible to develop these forces to implement this programme.

The combination of this opportunist group with a demoralised WIL, now locked into entryism in a very hostile milieu, without the 'spark' which 'ultra-leftist' subjective revolutionaries often have in common with more developed Marxist – was Trotsky really wrong to criticise Hicks and Purcell in the way he did over the betrayal of the 1926 General strike as RP alleges? - caused its demise in 1997. It became soon apparent that Workers Action, the WIL's successor organisation, had become completely reformists and not just super Pabloites as the ex-ISGers had been.

This was most starkly demonstrated in a WA editorial of Nov/ Dec. 2004 which explained why they thought socialist could vote for John Kerry in the US election in 2004*; "Advocating a vote for Kerry does not mean that socialists should campaign for him. Neither does it imply any political support for the Kerry-Edwards platform. It means that socialists should, on this occasion; vote to put Bush out, which means voting for Kerry. It is permissible to hold the nose while doing so, or to walk through disinfectant after leaving the voting booth, as did those voters in France who preferred the crook Chirac to the fascist Le Pen".*

Logically it was also OK to vote for the right openly bourgeois candidate for President of France, Chirac, against Le Pen. Arguably this appalling political collapse was also prepared by the resolution to block with the supporters of Yeltsin during the coup led by Gennady Yanayev in August 1991 and thereafter to a neo -liberal softness on and increasing capitulation to imperialism which grew progressively worse during events in the Balkans, Rwanda and East Timor, but this is not the place to elaborate on that argument.

The old leaders retired from politics in disgust as much at themselves as what they had politically spawned. WA struggled on until its final issue No. 30 of August 2006 after which it apparently died without a whimper. It was a sad end to what was surely one of the best efforts to apply the Trotskyist Transitional Programme to entry work. They sought to work in the Labour party and thereby to forge a link to the mass of the working class to build revolutionary leadership but made the tactic unconditional and thus almost a strategy; entryism in all circumstances and not when conditions favour this tactic.

As the WA they had neglected always to build their own revolutionary current, openly and/or by tactical alliances with other self-proclaimed Trotskyist groups in whatever milieu presented itself even when conditions are not favourably for entryism in the Labour party. The WIL in practice and then increasingly in theory became deep entrist to such an extent that revolutionary politics was excess baggage too burdensome to bear. Hence its demise was prepared by the gradual adaption to neo-liberal reformism by the WIL and then more openly WA from 1987 to 2006. At a time when the growth of John McDonnell's LRC presents fresh hope of intervening successfully as revolutionaries in that milieu it is regrettable it made and pursued these fundamental tactical errors.

Revolutionaries and the Labour Party

A *Workers News* pamphlet

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Publisher's Note

This is not in any sense a mini-history of the Labour Party. It is a condensed overview of the attitude of the main revolutionary currents in Britain towards the Labour Party, and an attempt to sketch what we believe to be a correct orientation. It is the outcome of the WIL's reappraisal of our own positions. In large part it is based on a document discussed by the WIL's third congress in July 1993, and passed in an amended form at its fourth congress in February 1994. Although frequent reference is made to works by Lenin, Trotsky and others, we have dispensed with the 'scholarly apparatus' on the grounds that it is inappropriate to a publication of this sort, whose aim, among other things, is to stimulate readers to make an independent study of the Marxist classics in the light of current events, rather than to provide all the answers.

Introduction

THE COLLAPSE of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and the low level of class struggle in most of the imperialist countries, has given rise to a new political situation. The discrediting of socialism by Stalinism, and the decline in working class militancy, is now utilised by the reformist leaders to justify the abandonment of reform programmes and the dropping of even verbal commitments to the goal of socialism.

In Britain, under the impact of three election defeats by the Tories, the Kinnock-Hattersley 'dream ticket' tailored their programme to what they saw as the popular aspects of Thatcherism. They were able to do this by feeding off a chain of working class defeats, for which they, together with the TUC leaders, bore the primary responsibility. Labour's fourth successive general election debacle in 1992, far from discrediting 'new realism', encouraged the Smith-Beckett leadership to drive the party even further to the right, concentrating its attacks on the link between Labour and the trade unions. While the election of Michael Foot in 1981 was a weak echo of the ferment within the party's ranks after the defeat of 1979, each successive leader since then – Kinnock, Smith and now Blair – has represented a further shift to the right. The party's left wing, decimated by expulsions, resignations and desertions, has been entirely marginalised.

The collapse in the fortunes of the Labour left, which began with Benn's failure to win the deputy leadership contest in 1981 and the non-aggression pact concluded at Bishop's Stortford in 1982, is the result of its refusal to fight the right wing in any consistent or principled fashion. The wave of local government victories by the left, accompanied by heady talk of counterposing the 'local state' to the 'central state', met its first serious challenge with rate-capping, whereupon the vast majority of the left capitulated ignominiously and proceeded to implement Tory legislation.

After 15 years of Tory rule, the dominance of the right wing within the labour movement and the low ebb of the class struggle presents revolutionaries with specific problems. Neither ultra-left sectarianism (electoral abstentionism, refusal to carry out united front policy, empty declarations that 'the Labour Party is finished', etc) nor opportunist adaptation (uncritical tail-ending of what remains of the Bennite left) can possibly forge a revolutionary road forward for the working class.

On the historical plane, however, these problems have much deeper roots, which reflect an almost continuous failure on the part of would-be revolutionaries in Britain to develop a correct tactical orientation towards the Labour Party and the broad layers of workers who follow it.

Predictions that the Labour Party would rapidly collapse or that it was being transformed into a purely capitalist party have been made throughout its history. The Social Democratic Federation thought it could compete directly with the Labour Representation Committee when it walked out in 1901. But its successor, the British Socialist Party, was obliged to recognise reality when it affiliated to the Labour Party in 1916. In the course of 1924, Grigorii Zinoviev, the president of the Comintern, claimed both that Labour would be in office 'for many years to come' and that 'the disintegration of the Labour Party is now inevitable'! When the first MacDonald government collapsed in 1925, Communist Party theoretician R. Palme Dutt, on the basis of the heady rhetoric of the Comintern's fifth congress, could write of the Labour Party's 'decomposition'. With the victory of the 'New Line', the Communist Party declared in its 1929 election manifesto that the first Labour government had 'exposed the Labour Party leadership completely'. Dismissing the rank and file, it characterised Labour as 'a completely disciplined capitalist party'.

Most of the left felt obliged to develop some tactical orientation towards the Labour Party in the post-war period. By 1961, however, the Socialist Labour League, the largest British Trotskyist organisation at that time, had decided that the Labour right wing rested 'on the carcass of a party, not on a living movement'.

The student-based radicalisation which followed 1968 revived ultra-left moods. Writing in the 1970s, the League for Socialist Action (a split from the International Marxist Group) criticised those on the left who 'began to suggest that the Labour Party was "changing its nature", was evolving into a mere electoral machine along the lines of the Democratic Party in the USA rapidly being by-passed, in action, by the workers' movement'. Small wonder that the recent debate over the 'Clintonisation' of the Labour Party carries a strange sense of déjà vu.

The response of much of the left to Labour's fourth electoral debacle in a row in 1992 was equally light-minded, consisting in large part of stirring declarations that *now* was the time to build the independent revolutionary party, with some reaching the view that Labour was no longer a work-

ers' party of any sort. Militant's evacuation of its remaining members in the Labour Party, and its reincarnation as Militant Labour has succeeded only in greatly reducing its size and influence.

Unfortunately for those who staked their political reputations on such apocalyptic Judgements, the reports of the Labour Party's death have been greatly exaggerated. It has stubbornly refused to go away, and has proved a good deal more durable than the shrill sectarians. Long after many of them have lapsed into irrelevance or inactivity, or themselves gone over to reformism, social democracy continues to dominate the workers' movement in Britain, and remains the chief obstacle to the creation of a mass revolutionary party capable of leading the working class to power.

None of the foregoing is intended to underestimate the danger represented by Blair and the 'modernisers', who threaten more than any previous leadership to fundamentally undermine Labour's organic link with the trade unions. On the contrary, the central argument put forward in this pamphlet is the necessity to fight the right wing, and not to repeat the mistakes of all those who believed that they could defeat reformism merely by propaganda, or by ignoring the Labour Party altogether. We are at the same time no less critical of those who, having recoiled from ultra-leftism, make up for lost time by adapting to the politics of left reformism.

Attempts to duck the 'Labour Party question' on the grounds that it is 'merely' a tactical issue will inevitably rebound. Like the dialectic, it has a habit of recognising those who refuse to recognise it. Mistaken tactics based upon wildly incorrect perspectives will have strategic implications and lead to a profoundly deformed 'Marxism', which ignores the stage which the class has reached and instead substitutes its own frustrations and impatience. This in large part is the history of the left in Britain.

A profound ignorance of what Lenin and Trotsky said about the Labour Party exists in many left groups. Many will say that conditions have changed since their day. This is undeniably true. But the real question for revolutionaries is whether the relationship between Labour and the working class has qualitatively changed. If Trotsky, at a time when Labour could muster barely 150 MPs, found that the most 'dangerous' aspect of C.L.R. James's politics was his sectarian attitude towards the Labour Party, then it is high time that his professed followers heeded his advice today.

1. FROM MARXISM TO STALINISM

The early history of British reformism

The reformist Independent Labour Party (ILP) was formed in 1893. Frederick Engels viewed this event with some hope, and believed that revolutionaries should enter it and fight for a socialist programme, supporting the position of Marx's son-in-law, Edward Aveling, who took a seat on its national executive. At the same time, he, and Marx before him, opposed the sectarian antics of Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation (SDF), which had turned Marxist theory from a 'guide to action' into a 'rigid dogma', and whose sectarian view of workers cut it off from the masses. The ILP, although theoretically weak, represented for the first time since the demise of the Chartists, a chance to politically organise the labour movement independent of the bourgeoisie. The method of Marx and Engels is alien to today's sectarians, who are but pale imitators of the SDF, which in fact did some good work in the trade union field. Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), in *The Labour Party – A Marxist History*, deliberately ignore Engels' writings, and claim that the formation of the ILP was part of a defeat for the working class.

Unlike the parties of the Second International in continental Europe, the Labour Party never aimed even in words at the conquest of power by the working class. The direct forerunner of the Labour Party, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), was founded in 1900 in response to mounting legal attacks on trade union rights. It set itself no greater goal than the election of trade unionists to parliament and the pursuit of modest reform legislation. The self-styled Marxists of the SDF walked out of the LRC in 1901 in protest at its refusal to adopt a socialist programme, thereby leaving the field clear for the right wing and the muddle-heads of the ILP. The SDF set a precedent for the recurring illusion that the vanguard of the working class could be won by abstract propaganda for socialism, and without a serious struggle against the reformist leadership.

Dominated by Lib-Lab MPs and trade union bureaucrats, the Labour Party (as the LRC became in 1906) remained essentially an appendage of the Liberal Party, without any coherent platform of its own. With the outbreak of the imperialist war in 1914, the Labour leaders maintained their political subordination to the bourgeoisie, proving incapable of developing an independent class line. Keir Hardie and MacDonald retreated into personal pacifism, while Henderson joined the war cabinet. In 1918, under the impact of the Russian Revolution, and with the aim of heading off the rising militancy of the working class, the Labour Party did adopt a nominally 'socialist' constitution. But the seriousness of its expressed intention to expropriate the capitalist class may be gauged by the fact that the famous 'Clause Four' was drafted by the arch-gradualist Sidney Webb.

Nevertheless, for the first time the Labour Party had a formal programme distinct from that of the bourgeois parties. Taking advantage of divisions among the Liberals, the party made significant electoral advances in the post-war period. In 1924, Labour was able to form a government, albeit a minority one, for the first time. Its progressive measures were limited to the diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union, and Wheatley's Housing Bill. No encroachments were made on capitalist property rights, and far from liberating the colonial peoples, the Labour government used military force to crush those who rebelled against British imperialism.

The CPGB and the Labour Party

In contrast to the major European Communist Parties, which were the product of splits in the parties of the Second International, the Communist Party of Great Britain was formed during 1920-21 through the fusion of disparate small propaganda groups. With no more than 2-3,000 members, the CPGB was immediately faced with the problem of what line to adopt towards a Labour Party which was establishing a mass influence over the working class.

On this issue the CPGB's constituent groupings were completely divided. The British Socialist Party (successor to the SDF) had been affiliated to the Labour Party since 1916, but in abandoning its earlier sectarianism it had developed a distinctly opportunist trend. The Socialist Labour Party supported parliamentary action, but opposed work in the Labour Party. The Workers Socialist Federation and the South Wales syndicalists were against parliamentary action of any sort.

In April 1920, prior to the formation of the CPGB, Lenin wrote *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder* in opposition to the anti-parliamentary views of ultra-lefts like Sylvia Pankhurst and Willie Gallacher. After discussion with British communists, Lenin came down in favour of communist affiliation to the Labour Party, which he defined as a bourgeois workers' party – an organisation based on the working class, but with a pro-capitalist leadership. He believed that the federal structure of the Labour Party presented an opportunity to build a revolutionary opposition to these right-wing lead-

ers. This position was adopted as the official policy of the Communist International (CI) at its Second Congress (1920). Although the founding conference of the CPGB (July-August 1920) voted by a small majority to affiliate to the Labour Party, its leaders were in fact far from enthusiastic about implementing this decision. Instead of informing the Labour Party that the British Socialist Party had changed its name to the Communist Party, and would be maintaining its existing affiliation – which would have placed the Labour bureaucrats in a difficult position – the CPGB put in a new application for affiliation couched in terms which were clearly intended to provoke rejection. The Labour Party's executive happily obliged. And although pressure from the CI forced the CPGB to make a more serious approach, which was repeated at successive Labour Party conferences, the right wing used the block vote to prevent Communist affiliation.

As the Labour Party widened its electoral base in the working class, opportunist pressures made themselves felt within the CP. The election of a Labour government in 1924 prompted leading party theoretician Palme Dutt to argue that it was enough that Labour should remain independent of the capitalist parties, and that it would be a mistake to expect too much from a minority administration. The CI intervened sharply to instruct the CP to 'mobilise the broadest masses of the English proletariat to exert pressure on the Labour Government and the Labour Party to engage in a serious struggle against the capitalist classes'.

In addition to demanding that the Labour leaders should carry out their election promises, the CP was to campaign for the government to implement the following measures:

` (a) To deal with unemployment by effective taxation of the capitalists, and by taking over, under State and workers' control, enterprises shut down by the capitalists. (b) To take the initiative in nationalising the railways and mines; these to be administered in conjunction with the workers' organisations. (c) The Government must take energetic steps to liberate the peasants and workers of Ireland, India, and Egypt from the yoke of English imperialism. (d) It must be active in fighting the war danger in Europe and conclude an alliance with the Union of Soviet Republics . . . '

The resolution went on to state that the CP should:

` . . . preserve its ideological, tactical and organisational independence . . . It must appeal to all groups and organisations of the working class who demand of the Labour Government a resolute struggle against the bourgeoisie'.

Any possibilities which this approach opened up for a correct orientation towards the Labour Party were, however, destroyed by the political degeneration of the Communist International. The leftist rhetoric of the CI's Fifth Congress, having proved at variance with reality, paved the way for a lurch into opportunism. It was in the context of this right turn by the Comintern that the CPGB organised the National Left Wing Movement in the Labour Party.

From the Left Wing Movement to the Third Period

Despite rejection of the CPGB's repeated applications for affiliation, and increasing restrictions on their rights, CPers had remained active in the Labour Party, either as individual members or as trade union delegates. There was also a much broader section of the Labour Party rank and file who were politically sympathetic to the CP. From 1925, attempts were made to organise these forces into the Left Wing Movement (L WM), backed up by the CP-sponsored weekly *The Sunday Worker*. Although it established considerable influence among rank-and-file militants – *The Sunday Worker* reached a peak circulation of 100,000 – the LWM was never clear as to the character of the 'left wing' it was fighting to build. It veered between demands for 'the overthrow of the capitalist class and the establishment of international socialism' and calls for a return to 'the socialism of Keir Hardie', while boosting the credibility of the various Labour and trade union lefts who wrote for the paper. Rather than assisting workers towards a political understanding of social democracy, such methods could only reinforce their existing illusions.

When opposition to the LWM did emerge in the CPGB, it took the ultra-left form of arguing that an organised opposition to the right wing within the Labour Party merely presented an obstacle to the working class, who were allegedly already on the point of deserting the Labour Party en masse and joining the Communist Party. The leaders of this tendency in the CP – Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt – were encouraged by the Comintern leadership, which was anxious to deflect Trotskyist criticisms of its own role in the CPGB's rightward shift by laying the blame on a section of the national leadership.

As Stalin tried to outflank his Bukharinite rivals, the Comintern imposed a 'new line' on the CPGB which developed this ultra-leftism into suicidal sectarianism. In the 1929 general election, workers were urged to vote Communist where the party stood a candidate (25 constituencies in all), and elsewhere to spoil their ballot papers. The CPGB was instructed to tell British workers that it was 'a crime equivalent to blacklegging' to belong to the Labour Party and social democracy was now redefined by Stalin as 'social fascism'. In implementing this line, the CPGB all but eradicated its hard-won influence within the labour movement and, not surprisingly, failed to make any political gains from MacDonald's betrayal in 1931.

Having evolved into a hardened Stalinist formation, the CPGB abandoned its attempts to develop a revolutionary orientation towards the Labour Party.

2. TROTSKYISM AND THE LABOUR PARTY

The struggle for a revolutionary orientation

Trotsky, while emphasising the need for a rigorous criticism of both left- and right-wing reformists, firmly rejected sectarianism towards social democracy. In 1934, for example, he urged his Belgian supporters to call for the election of a Labour government. 'We could give up this slogan', he wrote, 'only if the Social Democracy – *before its coming to power* – should begin greatly to weaken, ceding its influence to a revolutionary party; but, alas, today such a perspective is purely theoretical. Neither the general political situation nor the relation of forces within the proletariat permits the withdrawal of the slogan "Power to the Social Democracy! " '. He also opposed the ILP decision in the 1935 general election to boycott those Labour candidates who refused to take an anti-war line. If successful, Trotsky argued, this tactic would prevent the election of a Labour government and thus deny the opportunity of revolutionaries to expose the Labour leaders. To those in the ILP who argued that the reformist leaders were already sufficiently exposed as reactionaries, Trotsky replied: 'For us – yes! But not for the masses, the eight millions who voted Labour'. It was necessary to support the workers in their fight for a Labour government, while warning of the consequences of the Labour Party's pro-capitalist programme.

Trotsky by no means made a fetish of work in the Labour Party. In its initial phase, the work of the British section of the International Left Opposition was directed towards the Communist Party – at first from within the CP and then, following expulsion, from outside. This was in line with the Trotskyists' international policy of fighting for the reform of the Comintern. After 1933, when its refusal to learn from the Nazi victory in Germany revealed the Third International to

be dead for the purposes of revolution, Trotsky advised his British supporters to enter the ILP, which had broken from the Labour Party the previous year, and to work for its transformation from a centrist to a revolutionary organisation. Trotsky was, however, clear that 'for every revolutionary organisation in Britain its attitude to the masses and to the class is almost coincident with its attitude towards the Labour Party, which bases itself on the trade unions'. The task of the ILP, Trotsky argued, was not immediately one of total entry into the Labour Party, but of building a strong fraction in the trade unions 'and, consequently, in the Labour Party'. It was only through such fraction work that the ILP could know when total entry was necessary. It was true, Trotsky recognised, that the policy of the Labour Party's existing left wing was atrocious. 'But this only means that it is necessary to counterpose to it inside the Labour Party another, a correct Marxist policy'. As for the argument that it would be impossible to succeed in changing the Labour Party into a Marxist body, Trotsky replied: 'With that we are entirely in accord: the bureaucracy will not surrender. But the revolutionists, functioning outside and inside, can and must succeed in winning over tens and hundreds of thousands of workers'.

As the ILP leadership's policies reduced the organisation to political irrelevance, Trotsky supported a campaign in the ILP for entry into the Labour Party and, in the event of the leadership's refusal, that the Trotskyists should enter the Labour Party on their own account. The 'Geneva' pre-conference of the Fourth International instructed the British Trotskyists to unify on the basis of Labour Party entry.

Trotsky's followers broke with the moribund ILP, and the Militant Group led by Denzil Harber and Starkey Jackson pursued the entry tactic in the Labour Party. They seem to have based themselves on methods of the National Left Wing Movement, in which Jackson had participated in the 1920s. Thus the first issue of *The Militant* (July 1937) carried the front-page slogan 'Now For a Real Left Wing! '. The group tried artificially to construct its own centrist current in the form of the Militant Labour League, the membership of which remained almost exclusively Trotskyist.

The practice of entry work was common to almost all Trotskyists, with the exception of sectarians like C.L.R. James and his group, and the Maitland-Tait Revolutionary Socialist Party in Edinburgh. After the Workers International League (WIL) split from the Militant Group in 1937, it carried out work within the Labour Party for a further four to five years. When a minority tendency emerged in the late 1940s arguing for an open organisation and a turn to industrial rather than Labour Party work, the WIL opposed it on the grounds that movements in the trade unions necessarily found their expression in the Labour Party, and that therefore it was obligatory for Trotskyists to concentrate on entry work.

By 1941, however, in most areas Labour Party activity had dwindled as a result of conscription and the electoral truce. Therefore, the WIL empirically adopted the line advocated by the former opposition, withdrew from the Labour Party, concentrated on trade union intervention, and maintained a small fraction within the ILP. In the short term this yielded real results. The WIL was able to recruit a significant number of industrial militants disgusted by the class collaborationist line of the CP after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. The Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), by contrast, maintained its Labour Party orientation and suffered stagnation and mounting internal factional warfare.

The RSL and the WIL fused to form the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) in March 1944, numerically and politically dominated by ex-WIL members. The RCP continued the WIL policy of calling for Labour to break the coalition and 'take power on a socialist programme'. The logic of this position should have directed the bulk of the RCP's membership back into the Labour Party, under the very circumstances of mass radicalisation which both the WIL and the RSL had anticipated in the pre-1941 period. Instead, the RCP believed that an organisation of no more than 500 could directly outbid the Labour Party for the allegiance of the mass of the working class.

The ambiguities of 'Labour to power'

The slogan of 'Labour to power on a socialist programme', emphasised by the WIL and the RCP in this period, requires a critical examination, particularly in view of the role variations on this demand have played down the years, It has its origins and basis in some of Trotsky's writings (e.g., on Belgium). A well-known passage in the Transitional Programme states:

' . . . the demand, systematically addressed to the old leadership – "break with the bourgeoisie, take the power! " – is an extremely important weapon for exposing the treacherous character of the parties and organisations of the Second, Third and Amsterdam Internationals'.

Trotsky derived this position from the tactic employed by the Bolsheviks in the summer of 1917. Indeed, the *Transitional Programme* is posited on the short-term development of pre-revolutionary situations, in which bourgeois democracy would rapidly become no longer viable. But it is a different matter to raise the slogan in circumstances where dual power does not exist even in embryo, where there is no immediate prospect of a government coming to power based on workers' councils, and where the immediate scenario is of a reformist party taking office on the basis of a majority in parliament.

The central ambiguity is the blurring of the fundamental distinction between governmental office in a bourgeois state, and a workers' government basing itself on proletarian power. To the extent that mass illusions in Labour have generally taken the form of a belief that it would carry out significant reforms through parliament – rather than 'take power' – the demand addresses the illusions workers don't have, rather than the ones they do.

The other half of the equation – the 'socialist programme' on which Labour is supposed to 'take power' – presents similar problems. A fully socialist programme would incorporate such demands as the smashing of the bourgeois state apparatus and the expropriation of the big bourgeoisie. Among different layers of the working class this can breed the illusion that reformism can 'do the job', and what's more do it through parliament, or produce scepticism among more advanced workers who already understand that the right-wing leaders will not bring about socialism. It evades the real task of driving a wedge between the social democratic leaders and the workers who have elected them to office.

3. THE EPIGONES OF TROTSKY

Apocalypse Now: The Healy tendency

The RCP intervened in the 1945 general election on the slogan 'Labour to power', but the logic of fighting alongside the masses for a Labour government should have required it to commit substantial forces to work in the Labour Party. Because of the gains that had been made by the WIL during the course of the war, the RCP leadership envisaged a further period of growth in which prospects for a mass party were directly on the agenda. Consequently, it only devoted a small proportion of its resources towards fraction work, and placed its overwhelming emphasis on 'open' work. The rapid radicalisation that took place in the Labour rank and file, as a reflection of wider radicalisation of the class, largely bypassed the RCP.

The rationale of the RCP leadership's position was that the classical conditions for entryism (as outlined by Trotsky during the discussion around the 'French turn' of 1934-5) did not exist. The Healy minority argued for entry from 1945

onwards on the erroneous basis that such conditions did indeed exist, and projected an ever-deepening economic crisis and the existence of a pre-revolutionary situation.
As a result of a split bureaucratically imposed on the RCP by the International Secretariat, supported by the SWP(US), the Healy group began entry work in 1947. Although formally committed to winning Labour Party members to a revolutionary programme, the Healyites in practice built a right-centrist tendency around the paper *Socialist Outlook*, which engaged in wholesale adaptation to left reformists and Stalinist fellow travellers. The fragments of the former RCP majority, led by Ted Grant and Tony Cliff (forerunners of the present Militant Labour and Socialist Workers Party), had collapsed into the Labour Party without any clear political perspective. All three groupings, however, anticipated long-term work within social democracy as the precondition for the emergence of a revolutionary organisation.
The main feature of Healy's group after 1950 was its political liquidation into the Bevanite / Tribune milieu. During his period of Labour Party entry, Healy held the perspective of a 'left centrist' movement emerging within the party and breaking with the right wing. The Healyites' role was to bury themselves in the Labour left in anticipation of taking the leadership of the resulting centrist formation.
Healy's break with this perspective and the withdrawal of his forces from the Labour Party was an uneven process, taking place during the years 1959-64. Thereafter, the emphasis shifted to ultra-left rhetoric – self-proclamation as the revolutionary leadership to which workers would soon gravitate en masse, having broken with reformism under the impact of an ever-intensifying capitalist crisis. Flowing from this perspective was the perennial call. to 'build the mass YS' (which never materialised) and the fetishing of a daily paper, which for all its advantages in intervening in industrial struggles proved a millstone round the neck of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) and the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). However, this cataclysmic and triumphalist line repeatedly ran up against the problem that reformism was not dead, nor was there a mass break by workers to the left from the Labour Party. In 1966, the SLL launched the slogan 'make the left MPs fight'. But the absence of a significant radicalisation in the Labour Party rank and file, or a polarisation in the Parliamentary Labour Party comparable to the Bevanite period, allied to the sterile, dogmatic fashion in which the campaign was implemented, meant that it had a very limited impact.
The lack of any clear or systematic tactic towards the Labour Party during its six years in office (1964-70) can best be illustrated by the fact that the SLL issued calls to bring down the Labour government in 1965 and 1969, yet advocated re-electing Labour in 1966 and 1970.
Although the SLL struck an 'orthodox' note in criticising the International Marxist Group's (IMG) ultra-leftism in the 1970 general election, Its continuing on-off call for a 'Labour government committed to socialist policies' was to prove the pivot around which the Healyites swung from adaptation to reformist illusions Into their most sustained period of sectarian ultra-leftism. Although it called for a Labour vote at the two 1974 general elections, the recently 'transformed' WRP presented its own handful of candidates as the answer to the crisis. Within two years, Healy had decided that reformism had run its historic course, and once again the working class was on the verge of a mass defection from Labour. There followed a three-year campaign to 'bring down the Labour government / Lib-Lab coalition' which succeeded only in isolating the WRP and substantially reducing its membership.
Having thus burnt its fingers, the WRP leadership engaged in another empirical change of tack in the early 1980s, when it promoted a line of uncritical support to Ken Livingstone, Ted Knight and other left-reformists around the WRP-subsidised *Labour Herald*. This adaptation was combined with ultra-leftist declarations that reformism was finished and that the Tory government should be brought down and replaced by a 'workers' revolutionary government'. This schizophrenic line found its embodiment in Healy's 'community councils', which could be presented alternatively either as a platform for left-reformists or as the embryo of soviets.
Since the WRP explosion in 1985, all the groups who issued out of it (apart from the WIL) have adopted methods drawn from Healyism's later period, often giving them a further ultra-left twist: proclaiming a permanent revolutionary situation and the necessity of a general strike and a workers' revolutionary government (WRP / *News Line*); proposing that the trade unions should cease funding the Labour Party and build a revolutionary party instead (WRP / *Workers Press*); announcing that Labour is no longer a bourgeois workers' party (International Communist Party); toadying to Livingstone and Knight, combined with crazy predictions of imminent military coups and economic catastrophe (*Socialist Future* and the Marxist Party). Most of these groups regard revolutionary fraction work in the Labour Party as tantamount to betrayal, whilst retrospectively justifying almost everything Healy himself did inside the Labour Party.

Building 'the socialist alternative': the SWP tradition

The state-capitalist tendency led by Tony Cliff, now the SWP, originated as one of the fragments of the old RCP majority. Founded in 1950, and known as the Socialist Review group, the Cliff tendency was at that time committed, as were all ex-RCP groupings, to working inside the Labour Party. Although they did not share Healy's inflated expectations concerning the potential of the Bevanite movement, the Cliffites nevertheless agreed that a revolutionary party in Britain would emerge as the consequence of a split in the Labour Party.
In contrast to the Healy group, which made big gains from the crisis in the CPGB in 1956-57, the Cliffites remained a small and un-influential group buried inside the Labour Party. By the early 1960s, Cliff had arrived at a virtually liquidationist position towards Labour. 'Marxists, ' he wrote, 'should not set themselves up as a party or embryo of a party of their own. They should remember that the working class looks to the Labour Party as the political organisation of the class . . . ' Cliff even wound up the journal *Socialist Review*, and for several years his tendency was without an organ of its own.
With the upsurge of student rebellion and the Vietnam protest movement in the late 1960s, however, the International Socialism group (IS), as the Cliffites were now known, withdrew its forces from the Labour Party and set up shop as an independent organisation. It used the substantial forces it won from the student milieu to implement a 'turn to industry'. During the wave of working class struggles against the 1970-74 Heath government, the IS was able to recruit hundreds of trade union militants, giving it for the first time a significant industrial base. However, it won these workers by catering to their syndicalist outlook, and failed totally to prepare industrial militants for the political challenge presented by the re-election of Labour in 1974.
By the mid-1970s the IS was probably the largest organisation on the left in Britain, claiming a membership of some three thousand. Disoriented by these organisational gains, Cliff came to share Healy's illusions that the betrayals of the Wilson / Callaghan governments would cause the working class to reject reformism and rally to the revolutionary party. Accordingly, in 1976 the IS was renamed the Socialist Workers Party and stood against Labour in a number of by-elections – receiving, however, only the most derisory votes.
While the SWP did not fall into the trap of demanding that a working class still tied to reformism should bring the Labour government down, it had given no more thought to tactics in relation to Labour in office than the WRP had. When the working class failed to break from Labour to the SWP, Cliff

launched the Anti-Nazi League as a vehicle for recruitment. In the hands of the SWP, the struggle against the National Front became a diversion from the political battle against the Labour Party leadership. The SWP could identify the causes of racism and fascism in unemployment and bad housing, but because it rejected any idea of putting demands on the Labour government, or organising inside the Labour Party against the right wing, it could offer only abstract propaganda for socialism as an alternative to capitalism.

Although the SWP rapidly abandoned the attempt to mount an electoral challenge to Labour, it has since remained dogmatically committed to organisational independence, refusing to engage in any fraction work inside the Labour Party even during the upsurge of a left-reformist movement around Tony Benn in 1979-81. Whenever a general election rolls around, the SWP has usually called on workers to 'vote Labour without illusions' – which allows it to evade the problem of addressing the illusions workers do have in the Labour Party and developing tactics and strategy to break them from these illusions. In 1991, the SWP launched its 'open letter' stunt, whereby Labour left-wingers were persuaded to publicly announce that they had quit the Labour Party to 'build a socialist alternative' outside it.

in 1925, Communist Party theoretician R. Palme Dutt (above), on the basis of the heady rhetoric of the Comintern's fifth congress, could write of the Labour Party's 'decomposition'. With the victory of the 'New Line', the Communist Party declared in its 1929 election manifesto that the first Labour government had 'exposed the Labour Party leadership completely'. Dismissing the rank and file, it characterised Labour as 'a completely disciplined capitalist party'.

The organisational sectarianism of the SWP has not prevented it, however, from adopting a thoroughly opportunist approach to potential converts from the Labour left. Having rejected the method of transitional demands in favour of the old social democratic division into a minimum and a maximum programme, the SWP pursues a combination of reformist practice and propaganda for a future socialist society which dovetails neatly with the outlook of dissident left-reformists. Those who have joined the SWP have been recruited on the basis of their despair at prospects in the Labour Party rather than through a struggle to win them to revolutionary politics.

Militant: from heads down to abandon ship

Like the SWP, Militant has its origins in the break-up of the RCP. During the late 1940s, Ted Grant opposed Healy's line of total entry into the Labour Party and concentrated on building an independent revolutionary party. By 1949, however, the failure of this strategy, and the isolation of the RCP, resulted in a demoralised leadership collapsing into the Labour Party on the purely negative basis that nothing else was possible in the circumstances. Having reunited with the Healy group in 1949, most of the RCP majority either lapsed into inactivity or found themselves expelled.

In 1950, a few dozen former majority supporters regrouped around Ted Grant. Lacking any real perspectives, other than merely surviving until better times came, the Grant tendency led a fairly low-level existence inside the Labour Party. Only in the north-west, where a group around the paper *Rally* worked in the Labour League of Youth, did the Grantites achieve any growth or influence. Like the Cliffites, they failed to make any significant gains from the CPGB crisis after 1956, despite adopting a higher profile with the launch of the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL) in 1957. This functioned as little more than the branch office of Pablo and Mandel's International Secretariat, to which the Grantites were now affiliated, and made little impact either inside or outside the Labour Party.

Even the Grantites' base in the Labour Party youth was undercut from the late 1950s by the Healy group's turn to work in this field. The formation of the Young Socialists in 1960 was followed by a considerable expansion of the Healy tendency. Grant's supporters in the YS were marginalised, and found themselves reduced to collaborating with the Cliff group in the production of *Young Guard* in opposition to the Healyites' *Keep Left*. The one point at which it seemed the Grant group might be getting somewhere was in 1964, when they succeeded in winning a layer of prominent ex-Healyites along with the Midlands-based International Group. It was then that the monthly *Militant* newspaper was launched. This development was cut short in 1965, when a leading Grantite supported the use of the police to remove Healyite youth from a YS branch meeting, producing a split between those who defended this action (Grant and his supporters) and those who opposed it (the ex-Healyites and the International Group).

The Grantites' stand on this issue was symptomatic of their attitude to work in the Labour Party. For by this stage the RSL had effectively abandoned its initial combination of open and entry work in favour of its own version of deep entryism. This became more pronounced after Militant split from the USec in 1965, following which it ceased to produce any distinctively Trotskyist publication. And although Militant took control of the LPYS after the withdrawal of the Healy tendency, it refused to use this position to mount any real political challenge to the bureaucracy, arguing that it was necessary to avoid expulsion at all costs in order to be there when a future centrist movement arose inside the Labour Party. This passive waiting on events, together with its wooden conception of entry work, left Militant in no position to make gains from the student radicalisation of the late 1960s. Instead it exclusively concentrated on the Labour Party at a time when the party's local organisation was largely moribund.

Not until the early 1970s, when the wave of struggles against the Heath government began to breathe life back into the Labour Party rank and file, did Militant make significant gains. It was able to do so not so much because of its own political abilities, but because the removal from the Labour Party of the much larger forces led by Healy and Cliff gave Militant a clear field. By 1975 Grant was able to claim 1,000 members, and the upsurge of the Labour left in the late 1970s resulted in Militant becoming the largest grouping on the far left, with a claimed membership of several thousand. By contrast, the independent 'revolutionary parties' founded by Healy and Cliff were severely reduced in size by the early 1980s.

Organisationally, Militant's political practice inside the Labour Party was rigidly sectarian. It refused to operate any meaningful united front policy, holding aloof from any serious intervention in the Bennite movement and dismissing other groups collectively as 'the sects'. Rather than providing leadership to the leftward-moving sections of the Labour Party rank and file, Militant concentrated on individual recruitment. This organisational sectarianism went hand in hand with opportunist adaptation to the reformist consciousness of the Labour Party membership. Militant never tired of assuring the working class that the transition from capitalism to so-

cialism could be achieved through parliament. According to this argument, in Britain the smashing of the bourgeois state apparatus and the establishment of direct organs of workers' power in the form of soviets and a workers' militia would be unnecessary. A majority of socialist MPs in the House of Commons would simply pass an enabling act nationalising the top 200 capitalist companies and thereby secure the peaceful expropriation of the bourgeoisie.

Whereas Militant had previously avoided taking up positions in the Labour Party, the growth of the tendency convinced it that it was now strong enough to make a bid to oust the right wing and establish a dominant position on Liverpool City Council, although during the period of the 1983-85 'socialist' council it never made up more than a dozen of the 49-strong Labour group. Its real strength in Liverpool came from its hegemonic position as the only left-wing organisation of any size operating inside the Labour Party, and its control of the District Labour Party (DLP). With the limited resources at the council's disposal, the building of thousands of new homes and the safeguarding of jobs and services at this time was not unimportant, given the contemporary record of other left Labour councils and the lack of a revolutionary situation.

However, Militant did not simply act in a reformist manner because of a lack of revolutionary possibilities, but because its whole method was reformist and amounted to placing the control of the fight against the Tory government into the hands of the councillors first and the DLP second – which left the Joint Shop Stewards Committee trailing a poor third. A revolutionary organisation would in these circumstances have attempted to reverse this order of importance, and would have placed the leadership of organising the necessary strikes into the hands of accountable workers' bodies.

These reformist tactics, and the suspicion with which Militant viewed both workers' self-organisation and black self-organisation, led to a loss of confidence by much of the council workforce (which was compounded by the disastrous tactic of issuing the entire workforce with 'fake' redundancy notices), and meant that Militant was unable to undermine the petty-bourgeois misleaders of the Black Caucus. This confusion and lack of confidence among the workforce allowed Militant to successfully argue for a compromise with the Tories over rate-capping that effectively ended the struggle – although not before this defeat, and the failure to make a united front with the miners, was presented by Militant as a victory.

The right-wing backlash in the Labour Party against the left, which grew apace from the mid-1980s, produced a characteristic response from the Militant leaders – they failed to organise a serious fight against it. But whereas in the past this passivity had been justified by the necessity of remaining inside the Labour Party, it now led to an empirical shift away from entry work. This development, accelerated by Militant's gains in the anti-poll tax struggle, culminated in the decision to challenge the official Labour candidate at Walton in 1991, and the launch of Scottish Militant Labour the following year.

This 'turn' by Militant flew in the face of the whole strategy pursued by the tendency over a period of decades. It represented the junking of Militant's main distinguishing position – that it was essential to remain inside the Labour Party in order to take advantage of the radicalisation of the membership which would automatically result from developments in the class struggle. Not surprisingly, this dramatic change of line provoked a fierce factional struggle inside Militant, resulting in the expulsion of Grant and his followers who upheld the traditional entryist position. For their part, the Militant majority around Peter Taaffe have denied that any fundamental change in perspective has occurred, and depict the new turn as a mere tactical 'detour'.

However, the extension of the 'Scottish turn' to England and Wales with the launch of Militant Labour in 1993 suggests that the detour will be a prolonged one. Having uprooted its experienced cadre from its traditional environment, Militant has now resorted to the 'instant recruitment' methods it had previously derided when carried out by Healy and Cliff. Predictably, this has failed to stop the haemorrhage of members and, by any standards, the open party turn has been a failure, reducing Militant's influence to its lowest level since the early 1970s.

Left, right: the politics of the IMG

The tendency that formed the IMG originated in a Nottingham-based group which split from the RSL in 1961. The International Group, as the organisation was originally known, was committed to working inside the Labour Party. Indeed, at this time one of the central criticisms of the SLL by the USec – of which the IG remained a sympathising group – was the Healyites' increasing sectarianism towards Labour. After the attempt at rapprochement with the Grantites collapsed, the IMG was formed in 1965. It used its base in Nottingham Labour Party to launch the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) in 1966, and achieved further prominence when leading IMGer Ken Coates was expelled from the Labour Party.

But the growth of the VSC, which by 1968 was able to organise large demonstrations against the Labour government's support for US aggression in Vietnam, was based on predominantly middle class forces from outside the Labour Party. With the support of the leadership of USec, whose official section it now was, the IMG made a turn towards the radical student milieu, adapting to its ultra-leftism and its sectarianism towards the labour movement. Consequently, in 1969 the IMG withdrew from the Labour Party to concentrate on work among these 'new revolutionary forces'.

The IMG's ultra-leftist lurch led its leading figures – notably Robin Blackburn and Pat Jordan – to oppose a Labour vote in the 1970 general election. 'It would be absolutely incorrect for us to offer any kind of support to Harold Wilson or the party he leads . . . ', Blackburn wrote in the IMG paper *Red Mole*.

'The only principled course of action for revolutionary socialists during the coming election will be an active campaign to discredit both of Britain's largest capitalist parties [i.e., Labour and the Tories]. We should disrupt the campaigns of the bourgeois parties and their leading spokesmen using all the imaginative and direct methods which the last few years have taught us. '

In line with this argument, the paper carried a cartoon in which a mob of 'red moles' attack both Labour and Tory election speakers and tear up a 'Vote Labour' placard!

The wave of industrial struggles against the Heath government during the early 1970s largely bypassed the IMG, which maintained its orientation towards the radical milieu together with the accompanying sectarian ultra-leftism. At first the group refused to take up the demand, increasingly popular among workers, to bring down the Tory government. The justification given was that this was a reformist demand which diverted attention from the fact that the real fight was not with the Tories but with capitalism! By 1974, however, when the Heath government was driven from office, an element of political sanity had returned. In complete contradiction to its 1970 position, the IMG advocated a vote for the Labour Party in both the 1974 general elections.

The following period was marked by a partial turn back towards the traditional labour movement, calling for the formation of a 'class struggle left wing'. 'In the Labour Party, in the trade unions, in the trades councils, ' the IMG argued, 'it is necessary to organise an opposition which can fight the right -wing leaders'. In line with this perspective, the group began

to carry out some minimal fraction work inside the Labour Party.
But in the late 1970s, the IMG's main emphasis, like the WRP and SWP, was on building a political organisation independent of, and in direct political competition to, the Labour Party. To this end, under the slogan of 'socialist unity' the group advocated a fusion of the whole of the 'revolutionary left'. While the Healyites and Grantites were presumably in practice excluded from the proposed fusion, the IMG held high hopes for a merger with the Cliffites, whose launching of the Anti-Nazi League was greeted with the cry 'Hats off to the SWP'! But the state caps refused to play ball, and the IMG was reduced to fanning an electoral bloc with a few tiny groups like Big Flame.
From 1977 on, 'Socialist Unity' candidates stood in a variety of local elections and parliamentary by-elections on 'class struggle' policies which fell far short of a revolutionary programme. These candidates generally did a bit better than the SWP, but Socialist Unity failed to establish itself as a serious electoral alternative to the Labour Party.
During this period, the IMG had a sharp critique of the left Labour MPs. 'Where the Callaghans offer capitalist solutions to a capitalist problem, ' it was argued in 1977, 'Benn and the other lefts want the leopard to change its spots, so they try to paint it another colour, but the paint will wash off in the rain. ' The group also put forward a variant of the 'Make the Lefts Fight' line:
'Where the many thousands of workers still look to the lefts for a lead, the lefts must be put to the test. If they say they are opposed to the cuts they should organise to fight them. They should support every demonstration, strike or picket against the cuts and organise their supporters in such action. '
Such arguments were employed to expose the fact that the lefts would not fight. But what if the left reformists did carry out a struggle against the right wing? This possibility had not been seriously considered. Thus the rise of the Bennite movement, and the victories it scored over the Labour right at the 1980 party conference, caught the IMG unawares.
Only a year earlier the group had still been concentrating on the Socialist Unity project, standing a handful of candidates against Labour in the 1979 general election, and the group's nominal Labour Party fraction had lapsed into complete inactivity. Now the prospect of recruiting from among the Bennites produced a sudden lurch back towards the reformist milieu the IMG had abandoned just over a decade earlier.
Just as it had once tail-ended petty-bourgeois ultra-leftism, the IMG now adapted to left reformism. The group renamed itself the Socialist League (SL) and launched a new paper, *Socialist Action*, whose politics could best be described as left Bennite. The justification given for this was that the immediate threat to the bourgeoisie's interests was not an outbreak of revolutionary struggles, but rather the ousting of the Labour leadership by the Bennites. The role of the SL, according to this reasoning, was to build the Labour left. The subsequent decline of the Bennite movement in the face of a backlash by the Labour right produced tensions in the SL, which split in 1985.

Alan Thornett: "Originating in a group of oppositionists expelled from the WRP in 1974, the WSL had made great strides in breaking from the crazed sectarianism of Healy's organisation, and had polemically demolished the WRP's stupid call to bring down the Labour government. The WSL was quite clear that reformism still had a hold on the working class and that it was necessary to build a bridge from workers' existing consciousness to revolutionary politics."

One wing, led by John Ross, has pursued an increasingly liquidationist path. *Socialist Action*, now in magazine form, appears very infrequently, and the Rossites' main energies are directed into the production of the monthly *Socialist Campaign Group News*, which promotes the political views of the Campaign Group of MPs. Ross has established a symbiotic relationship with Ken Livingstone, under whose auspices *Socialist Action* has advocated a new version of socialist unity, this time involving a merger between the Labour left, and the remnants of British Stalinism around the *Morning Star*.
The other wing merged with Alan Thornett's group to form the International Socialist Group (ISG), which publishes the paper *Socialist Outlook* (and has been adopted as the USec's British section). At the heart of *Socialist Outlook*'s orientation is its project of building a 'class struggle left wing' in the Labour Party and the trade unions. This concept has bounced around in discussions for nearly two decades since the USec *Theses for Britain* of 1976 – and confusingly has meant different things at different times. But since the Bennite turn of the SL in the early 1980s, it has crystallised into a formula for a propaganda bloc with left reformism on its own terms.
The 'class struggle programme' around which *Outlook* aims to build 'the left wing' lacks any coherence. Many of the demands it puts forward are supportable in themselves. But unlike the *Transitional Programme*, its role is not clearly that of a bridge from the consciousness of workers today to the socialist revolution, but more a shopping list drawn up to suit the Benn-Scargill milieu. And although such a programme does reflect demands raised by sections of militant workers, it is necessarily the product of the unevenness and spontaneity of the class struggle, rather than of Marxist analysis. As such, it is wholly inadequate as a guide to mobilising the class in struggle.
This approach is presented by *Outlook*'s leadership as an application of the united front tactic. In fact, it represents unity in programme, rather than unity in action, with left reformism, with the inevitable result that criticism of *Outlook*'s 'allies' is toned down or non-existent.
As its chosen vehicles for the 'class struggle left wing' have either foundered (Socialist Movement, SMTUC, Women for Socialism) or gone their own ways (*Labour Briefing*, Unshackle the Unions campaign), and with left reformism in sharp decline, the ISG is today faced with a crisis of perspective. Under pressure from both right and left oppositions in the organisation, the leadership has adopted a more open profile, with the hammer and sickle, and references to 'supporters of the Fourth International', making occasional appearances in *Socialist Outlook*.

The Workers Socialist League and Socialist Organiser: part of the solution or part of the problem?

The tendency led by Sean Matgamna, which now publishes the paper *Socialist Organiser*, has a long political history, in the course of which its politics have undergone a series of twists and turns no less bewildering than those of the Healyite current.

Matgamna himself broke from Healy's SLL in 1963, and was briefly involved in the failed regroupment around *Militant*, apparently leaving in 1965 over the Mani affair. In 1969, when another attempt at regroupment was initiated by Tony Cliff's IS, Matgamna's group was the only one to respond positively to this appeal for revolutionary unity, joining the IS as the Trotskyist Tendency. During the late 1960s and early '70s, the Matgamna group had an orientation towards the United Secretariat, and the evolution of its attitude to the Labour Party paralleled that of the USec's British section, the IMG, shifting from entryism to ultra-leftism. In the 1970 general election, the Trotskyist Tendency reportedly adopted the same 'No Vote to Labour' line as Robin Blackburn and Co.

Alan Woods and Ted Grant: However, Militant did not simply act in a reformist manner because of a lack of revolutionary possibilities, but because its whole method was reformist and amounted to placing the control of the fight against the Tory government into the hands of the councillors first and the DLP second – which left the Joint Shop Stewards Committee trailing a poor third.

Having been expelled from the IS in 1971, the Matgamnaites established an independent group, publishing the paper *Workers Fight*. In 1976 they briefly fused with another ex -IS group (which later became Workers Power) to form the International-Communist League (I-CL), publishing the paper *Workers Action*. By this time the Matgamnaites had made another about-turn on the Labour Party, and now believed that a sectarian approach to Labour had been the main reason for the isolation of revolutionary groups in Britain. They placed increasing emphasis on fraction work in the Labour Party, particularly in the Militant-dominated LPYS. Resistance by the future Workers Power group to this turn was one of the points of conflict with Matgamna which led to their expulsion from the I-CL within months of its foundation.

During the run-up to the 1979 general election the I-CL, along with the small Chartist group, formed the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory (SCLV). This had the support of several Tribunite MPs and a number of constituency activists, and had as one of its declared aims that of 'rejuvenating the Labour Party'. In 1980 the SCLV began publishing *Socialist Organiser*, which was conceived as a 'broad' paper oriented towards (or, more accurately, liquidated into) the Bennite movement. 'We are all Bennites now', Matgamna declared.

One of the groups drawn into the *Socialist Organiser* project was Alan Thornett's Workers Socialist League (WSL). Originating in a group of oppositionists expelled from the WRP in 1974, the WSL had made great strides in breaking from the crazed sectarianism of Healy's organisation, and had polemically demolished the WRP's stupid call to bring down the Labour government. The WSL was quite clear that reformism still had a hold on the working class and that it was necessary to build a bridge from workers' existing consciousness to revolutionary politics.

To this end the WSL resurrected Healy's slogan from the 1960s, 'Make the Lefts Fight'. To place demands on left reformists was, of course, correct in itself. But the WSL saw the role of such demands as being to expose the fact that the left reformist leaders would *not* fight. Thornett's group did some limited fraction work in the Labour Party during the late 1970s, but saw the organisation of an opposition to the bureaucracy in the trade unions as the main task and placed little emphasis on the building of a parallel opposition inside the political wing of the labour movement.

The WSL also made programmatic advances on such questions as workers' control, women's and lesbian and gay oppression, and racism and fascism, and intervened energetically into strikes and other movements. However, its work contained a syndicalist undercurrent which little prepared it for the rapid shifts which took place within the Labour Party. Like the IMG, the WSL was therefore thrown into confusion when left-reformist leaders like Benn *did* take up a struggle against the Labour right. It finally dawned on the WSL at the time of the 1980 Labour Party conference that an opposition current of some considerable proportions had developed in the party around Benn. The WSL paper *Socialist Press* suddenly opened up a discussion on the relationship of revolutionaries to the Labour Party – something the WSL had evidently never considered in any detail before – while the organisation launched a pragmatic turn towards entry work.

In the course of this turn, the WSL quickly abandoned its criticisms of the Matgamnaites' opportunist politics in order to engage in joint work around *Socialist Organiser*, and within a year the two tendencies had fused. The Thornett group hoped that they would gain from the I-CL's experience and contacts in the Labour Party, while the Matgamnaites were eager to acquire the WSL's base in the trade unions. Having failed to develop a seriously thought-out revolutionary orientation towards the Labour Party, the WSL was vulnerable to Matgamna's opportunism towards the Bennite movement.

In 1982 the Chartists and their supporters broke away to launch *Labour Briefing*, leaving Matgamna and Thornett in possession of *Socialist Organiser*. This left-reformist publication was now effectively the public face of the new (fused) WSL, *Socialist Press* having been wound up and *Workers Action* reduced to an irregular theoretical journal. The paper's 'Trotskyism' was restricted to abstract propaganda, while the WSL's practical politics became increasingly reformist.

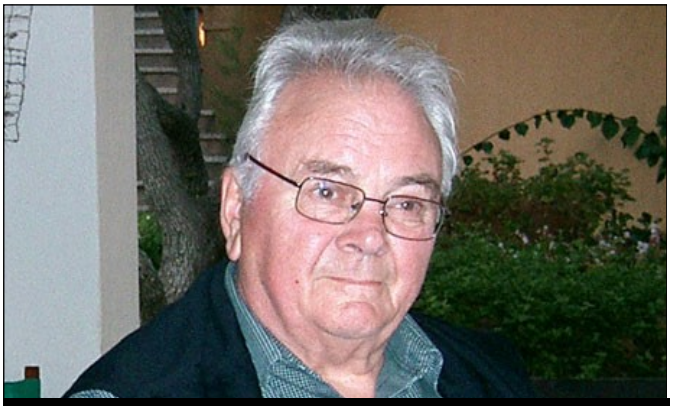
In the course of this adaptation to Labourism, the Matgamnaites careered rapidly to the right, adapting to the pro-imperialism of the social-democratic milieu. In 1982 they notoriously refused to take a stand in defence of Argentina during the Malvinas war. A left opposition to Matgamna's rightward trajectory arose, and it was expelled in 1983 to form the short-lived Workers Internationalist League. Thornett and his supporters compromised with the WSL right wing in an attempt to maintain the fusion, but they too were expelled by Matgamna in 1984, forming the Socialist Group, which merged with the ex-IMG International Group two years later.

Matgamna and his acolytes, for their part, continued to move rightwards. As the Kinnockite right wing established its ascendancy in the Labour Party during the latter part of the 1980s, the Matgamnaites adopted the heads-down approach previously associated with Militant. Faced with disciplinary action by the Labour leadership (as a result of complaints by maverick right-wing MP Frank Fields concerning Socialist Organiser's role in his attempted deselection) Matgamna's response was to distance SO from other left-wing organisations under threat from Kinnock. These groups might be authoritarian sects whose practices were incompatible with

membership of a social-democratic party, he argued, but SO was something different.
In order to underscore SO's compatibility with the Labour Party's Kinnockite regime, in 1991 the tendency denounced Leslie Mahmood's candidacy in Walton in the most disgraceful terms, even sending members in from outside the constituency to campaign for right-wing witch-hunter Peter Kilfoyle. SO repeated this cowardly capitulation in the 1992 general election, campaigning against expelled MPs like Dave Nellist. Matgamna's group stands as a particularly virulent example of how a move away from sectarianism can end up in opportunism towards the Labour bureaucracy.

4. REVOLUTIONARIES AND THE LABOUR PARTY TODAY

This overview has sought to show that similar mistakes in relation to the Labour Party have been made by would-be revolutionaries throughout the history of Marxism in Britain. These have broadly fallen into two camps – adaptation to reformism on the one hand, and sectarian abstention from its internal life on the other. What is required instead is an approach which combines political principle with tactical flexibility, open work with fraction work. In this respect Lenin and Trotsky's writings in the 1920s and '30s remain an essential guide to action.
This presupposes that Labour remains qualitatively the same type of organisation that it was in Lenin and Trotsky's day – a bourgeois workers' party. There is no sign that this will cease to be the case in the short to medium term.
Even if the Labour right wing were to succeed in their objective of weakening or even terminating the present institutionalised links with the trade unions – and there are obvious obstacles to this, not least the union bureaucracy's reluctance to provide funding without any guarantee of a say in policy – Labour would in all likelihood continue to be a bourgeois workers' party. Important as the 'organic link' with the unions is, it is not decisive in defining the Labour Party's class character; if it were, then Labour, along with the Australian Labour Party, would be one of the only bourgeois workers' parties in the world. A continental social democratic party like the SPD, for example, maintains close informal links with the union bureaucracy, although there is no formal, institutionalised relationship. While the present need for union funds means that the link is unlikely to be entirely broken, there remains the danger that state funding of parties would pose to this situation. State funding, like the popular frontist support within the Labour Party for election deals with the Liberals and for proportional representation, must be vigorously opposed by all socialists.
Nor does the undoubted decline in the party membership, or the changes in its social composition, represent any decisive shift in Labour's basic character. The figure of 90,000 bandied around in the capitalist press is a wilful misrepresentation of Labour membership, which probably stands at around 200,000 (even if many of these are largely passive members). Recent membership surveys have shown that there is a preponderance of middle-aged male white-collar and public-sector workers; a much smaller proportion of manual and private-sector employees; and a virtually non-existent youth membership. This is in part a reflection of the fact that the structure of the working class has changed, and also of the demoralisation produced among workers by successive defeats. But the significance of these developments should not be exaggerated. Very rarely has Labour had a mass, active working class membership, except in a few areas for relatively short periods of time.
However, there is not necessarily a correlation between the size of the party membership and Labour's level of support in the class as a whole. Despite the betrayals of the party leadership, the Labour Party's electoral base has not collapsed.



Ken Coates launched the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC). The origins of the IMG was ultra-leftist and sectarian towards the labour movement.

Admittedly, the enthusiastic Labourism which could be found among workers in the past has now largely evaporated under the impact of 'new realism'. Fewer Labour voters today hold out much hope of radical reforms from a Labour government (though even these illusions have not entirely disappeared). Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of class conscious workers retain their political allegiance to the Labour Party. Where workers have defected from Labour, it has usually been to the Tories or to the Liberal Democrats, although in Scotland the picture has been complicated by the growth of support in the working class for the SNP. Part of this is undoubtedly due to the SNP's more radical stance on some issues, including the poll tax, but it nevertheless represents a shift away from the labour movement. At the 1992 general election, 'revolutionary' candidates standing against the Labour Party registered even more derisory votes than ever before. Only the three Militant candidates (who in fact stood on a left reformist programme) attracted any substantial working class support, and only one of these – Dave Nellist in Coventry – came within shouting distance of defeating the official Labour candidate.
Militant's results were the exception rather than the rule – and for solid reasons. Not only were the candidates well-known figures (in two cases they were sitting MPs), but more importantly their independent campaigns were the result of effective splits in the local Labour Parties, splits which were themselves the outcome of years of entry work by Militant. Furthermore, as the experience of Liverpool Broad Left indicates, such breakaway organisations cannot sustain themselves as a mass political alternative to Labour except under conditions of a high level of class struggle and political consciousness.
The argument put forward by Militant Labour or the WRP / *Workers Press* that the situation is ripe nationally for an independent electoral challenge to Labour from the left bears no relationship to political reality. These groups ignore Lenin's emphasis on the need for 'a *sober* assessment of the *actual* level of political consciousness of the working class as a whole (and not just its communist vanguard)'. It is not that their line doesn't find a resonance among some groups of workers. Periods of retreat and demoralisation frequently produce ultra-left moods in a minority of the class. The real question is whether this line represents a correct approach to the politically conscious sections of the working class as a whole. And the answer is that it does not.
The recent growth of the SWP (admittedly highly exaggerated by the leadership) does not alter the essential contention, since it has not qualitatively altered the relationship of the working class to the Labour Party; it is merely that the SWP, within a shrinking left milieu, has benefited at the expense of its rivals. Having been founded in 1976 with the

Len McCluskey, Unite leader, bureaucrat, "It is only through the struggle to defeat this bureaucracy, in the Labour Party as in the trade unions, that a revolutionary leadership and a revolutionary party can be built".

specific objective of mounting an electoral challenge to Labour, the SWP's response to its humiliating rejection by the electorate was to retreat into a quasi-syndicalist denunciation of the irrelevance of electoral politics. Hence it fudges the political problem of how to break the hold that Labourism has over workers, and implies that bigger and better strikes and demonstrations alone will provide the solution to the question of working class consciousness.

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In Defence of Marxism Number 4 (May 1996)

The method of the united front today

THE HERITAGE OF THE COMINTERN

First developed as an international tactic at the third congress of the Communist International, the united front had a clear precedent in the policy of the Bolsheviks at the time of the Kornilov coup in September 1917. At a more general level the united front is rooted in the work of Marx and Engels in the First International, when they attempted to achieve maximum practical unity in struggle against the class enemy. Indeed, it could be said to be implicit in their famous statement in the *Communist Manifesto* that the communists

have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement. [1]

The immediate forerunner of the Comintern's development of the united front was the *Open Letter* of the KPD, addressed to all workers' parties and trade unions in January 1921. It called on them to unite their forces against the capitalist offensive in defence of workers' vital interests. It proposed a programme of joint struggle around a number of demands including:

higher pensions for disabled war veterans; elimination of unemployment; the improvement of the country's finances at the expense of the monopolies; the introduction of workers' control over food supplies, raw materials and fuel; reopening of all closed enterprises; control over sowing, harvesting and marketing of farm produce by peasants' councils and farm labourers' organisations; the immediate disarming of all bourgeois militarised organisations; the establishment of workers' self-defence; amnesty for political prisoners; and the immediate re-establishment of trade and diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia. [2]

The third congress of the Comintern met in July 1921 under the banner 'To the masses!' and under the impact of the failed March Action in Germany. The prevalence of adventurist and putschist tendencies within the KPD (urged on in part by Zinoviev) was only addressed in general terms, and a compromise was struck with the KPD leftists. However, the emphasis of the resolution *On Tactics* on the need for the Communists to strive for the maximum unity in action, to take up the struggle for immediate demands, and to fight for the leadership of non-proletarian oppressed strata marked a new maturity. Lenin intervened at the congress to praise the *Open Letter* as 'a model political step'. [3]

In December 1921, the ECCI, recognising that the experiences of the working class since the war had left it weakened, disunited and on the defensive, issued the *Directives on the United Front*. The united front was not conceived as a mutual amnesty. In calling for the CPs to propose fighting agreements to the reformists and centrists around the vital questions of the hour, the ECCI stressed that the communists must 'retain the unconditional right and the possibility

Without avoiding the necessary task of analysing the changing political situation, it must be recognised that the problem of the Labour Party remains a fundamental challenge for revolutionaries. Labour has proved a good deal more durable than have the prophets of its imminent demise. At the same time, it would be foolish not to recognise the problems that exist for revolutionaries in the present situation. The low level of the class struggle, the decline of the Labour left, a falling national membership and generally low attendance at meetings, not to mention the inexorable move to the right of the Labour leadership both nationally and locally, do not make for favourable conditions for revolutionaries in the Labour Party.
Under these circumstances it is particularly necessary to operate on the basis of a concrete analysis of the level of activity and the possible opportunities which exist. Only with such an analysis is it possible to determine the relative weight given to open and fraction work. It is wholly incorrect to fetishise Labour Party membership in the way *Socialist Organiser* does.
However, this should not obscure the fact that an important battle remains to be fought against the right wing inside the Labour Party. If the present leadership is allowed to get away with its plan to further weaken links with the unions, following the victory of One Member One Vote at the 1993 conference, and generally junk the collective traditions of the labour movement in an attempt to outbid the Tories as the party of individualism, this would mark a major setback for the working class. It is therefore necessary to organise resistance to the Labour leadership's political project. The success of such a defensive struggle can by no means be ruled out.

of expressing their opinion of the policy of all working class organisations without exception, not only before and after action has been taken but also, if necessary, during its course'.

Between early 1922 and the autumn of 1923, the KPD employed the united front with considerable success, winning a sympathetic response from reformist workers and greatly strengthening its base in the unions. This was to be heavily undercut by the debacle of October 1923, and the role of the leftist leadership of Fischer and Maslow, which had never accepted the united front in the first place.

The context in which the Comintern proposed the united front was the ebb of the post-war revolutionary wave, the stabilisation of the major imperialist powers, and the resurgence of the mass reformist parties. This gave rise to two related problems – firstly, how to relate to the workers organised in the mass reformist parties, which in most countries were still larger than the fledgling Communist parties; secondly, how to organise united class resistance to the bourgeoisie's counter-offensive.

The debate on the united front saw a further round of struggle against sectarian prejudices, following on from the disputes over parliamentarianism with the ultra-lefts like the KAPD [4] and the struggle within reformist trade unions at the second congress. Significant opposition was encountered from the Italian, French and Spanish parties. Replying to those who accused the Comintern leadership of conciliation towards the reformists, Trotsky had this to say:

If we were able simply to unite the working masses around our own banner or around our practical immediate slogans, and skip over reformist organisations, whether party or trade union, that would of course be the best thing in the world. But then the very question of the united front would not exist in its present form. [5]

From the outset, the united front was conceived as a *mass* tactic. For this reason, Trotsky stressed that

In cases where the Communist Party remains an organisation of a numerically insignificant minority, the question of its conduct on the mass-struggle front does not assume a decisive practical and organisational significance. In such conditions, mass actions remain under the leadership of the old organisations which by reason of their still powerful traditions continue to play the decisive role. [6]

The CPGB, for instance, with only 2-3,000 members could not propose a viable party-to-party united front to the Labour Party. Consequently, it was urged to seek affiliation to Labour, to take advantage of individual membership and influence through trade union delegates, and to supplement this with related tactics which would bring it into common struggle with reformist workers – the Minority Movement in the unions, the unemployed movement, the tactic of critical electoral support and of demands placed upon the Labour leadership.

However, in countries such as Germany, France and Italy, where mass Communist Parties competed directly with social democracy for the allegiance of workers, the united front was placed on the order of the day. However, it met with considerable resistance from leaderships which had been placing the main emphasis of their propaganda and agitation on the treachery of the reformist leaders.

The Fourth Congress of November 1922 supplemented the work on the united front in a number of related programmatic areas – the workers' government, trade union unity and the development of transitional demands. However, the Comintern of Lenin and Trotsky only sketched the problem of the united front in general terms. Aside from the need to concretise demands appropriate to, different national conditions (which the Comintern recognised), many detailed problems relating to the united front were not elaborated.

Moreover, the task of making a balance sheet of the Comintern and the united front in the 1920s is similar to that identified by Gandhi, who when asked what he thought of British civilisation, is supposed to have replied that it would be a good idea. Less than three years elapsed between the Third Congress and the death of Lenin, by which time the Comintern was already being 'Zinovievised'. The combination of resistance on the part of Comintern sections and outright rejection by the reformists allowed for few practical tests of the united front. Between the ultra-leftism of the Fifth congress and the opportunism which followed it, the entire question was obscured. Zinoviev's purge of the Comintern sections, and the subsequent Stalinisation of the International buried the healthy evolution of Comintern policy. The ultra-left slogan of the 'united front from below', made infamous by the 'Third Period', appeared first under Zinoviev. On the other hand, for all the 'leftism' of the Fifth Congress, it ushered in the period of the rotten bloc with the British TUC – a move which substituted diplomacy for struggle and shielded the reformist bureaucrats who were to betray the 1926 General Strike.

Only the rising danger of fascism in Germany and the suicidal policy of the KPD placed the united front back on the agenda, with Trotsky's increasingly urgent posing of the question after 1930. Even then, the correctness of the Left Opposition's critique of the Stalinist 'Third Period' was in the main only be proved negatIvely, although German Trotskyists were able to intervene successfully in some local areas. [7]

The German debacle, however, imprinted itself on the consciousness of European workers, in spite of the Comintern's refusal to make any critical assessment of the events leading up to the Nazis' victory. Between March 1933 and July 1935 (when the Seventh and last Congress of the Comintern met) Stalinism uneasily manoeuvred away from the Third Period and towards the Popular Front. The desire of the masses for a fighting unity of the working class ran well ahead of their own organisations. When thousands of armed royalists and fascists took to the streets of Paris on February 6, 1934, a spontaneous wave of unity swept the working class which briefly imposed itself upon both the reformists and the Stalinists, before the bureaucratic leaders were able to derail this mood in the direction of the Popular Front. The CGT, supported by the SFIO, called a general strike on February 12. The PCF, under pressure from its own rank and file, was obliged to change its 'social fascist' line at the last moment, and support the action, which attracted over one million workers in the Paris region alone. In June, 1934, the PCF congress proposed an anti-fascist united front to the SFIO.

This however proved to be only a prelude to the enlargement of the 'front' to include 'anti-fascist' bourgeois parties on an international scale – the Radical Party in France, bourgeois republican and Catalan nationalist parties in Spain, 'progressive' Tories, Liberals and churchmen in Britain etc. The purpose of the Popular Front was diametrically opposed to the tasks outlined by the early Comintern for the united front. In place of a fighting unity of the class, centred around its most vital and immediate class interests, the Popular Front subordinated class demands to the interests of the supposedly 'anti-fascist' wing of the bourgeoisie, in the interests of Stalin's counter-revolutionary foreign policy. Thus, in Spain, the Popular Front was a vehicle for reversing and destroying the mighty social revolution unleashed in

July 1936, which had proceeded spontaneously along the lines of the united front. In France, the Popular Front Blum government, which took office in the midst of the huge strike wave of June 1936, proceeded to roll back workers' gains, and defuse their militancy, before vacating the stage to the right wing Radical Chautemps.

The sections of the International Left Opposition confronting this rapidly changing situation were faced not only with new opportunities but with numerous problems. Inevitable difficulties attended the transition from propaganda circles to the mass work which the situation demanded. The turn from fighting as a public faction of the Comintern towards the construction of a new International posed the Trotskyists with the problem of how (if at all) they could apply the united front tactic.

"Since the Ceylonese bourgeoisie was too weak and too compromised to produce a significant bourgeois nationalist movement, the LSSP assumed the leadership not only of the working class, but of the anti-imperialist movement."

In most countries, the left oppositionists were too small to propose the tactic directly to the far larger reformist and Stalinist parties. Hence the 'French turn' – an application of 'the united front from within' as Trotsky called it to the mass reformist parties, which was carried out with varying degrees of success in a number of countries. In Vietnam – one of the few countries where the Trotskyists had a mass base – they took part in the *La Lutte* 'united front' group with the Stalinists between 1933 and 1936. The fragmentary nature of the accounts of this period, however, make any definitive judgement on its merits difficult. Although a truce was maintained between the two tendencies in the joint paper and joint candidates stood in elections, the Trotskyists maintained an independent underground organisation, and circulated pamphlets attacking the line of the Stalinists. As a result, the Trotskyists became for a period the dominant force in the workers' movement.

In Ceylon, the LSSP emerged from the petty bourgeois Suriya Mal movement, and was won to Trotskyism as a result of the role within it of the 'T Group'. Since the Ceylonese bourgeoisie was too weak and too compromised to produce a significant bourgeois nationalist movement, the LSSP assumed the leadership not only of the working class, but of the anti-imperialist movement. Although the party was, even by the 1950s, deeply infected by parliamentary reformism, its leadership of the '21 Demands' movement in 1963 showed the potential for the combination of political and industrial united front action. However, this promise was undercut by the manoeuvring of the leadership in the run-up to the infamous coalition government of 1964.

In the United States, the Socialist Workers Party, although only a small organisation, played a prominent role in organising against the fascist German-American Bund and Father Coughlin's supporters, who held a rally at Madison Square Gardens in February, 1939. Despite the hostility of the Jewish establishment, the socialist-Zionists and the Stalinists, 50,000 joined the counter-demonstration, including many members of Jewish organisations, Garveyites and rank and file CPers.

Because Trotskyists have only commanded a mass following in a few countries and in certain periods – Ceylon, Argentina, Vietnam, China and Bolivia – and because none of these countries is an imperialist country with the kind of workers' organisations the Comintern was primarily concerned with in the early 1920s, there exists no blueprint for applying the united front tactic in today's class struggle. Essentially, most of the experiences (would-be) revolutionaries have made in recent decades lie in the field of *applications of tactics derived from the united front*, rather than the united front itself.

PROBLEMS OF UNITED FRONT POLICY

The workers' movement, particularly in the imperialist countries, has been placed firmly on the defensive. With the collapse of Stalinism, processes which were already at work for a number of years have been accelerated – the decay of the traditional workers' organisations, falling levels of membership, chronic unemployment, a general (although by no means uniform) decline in strikes, the offensive of transnational capital and neo-liberal governments, and last, but by no means least, the absence in all countries of mass revolutionary parties.

In order to prepare for the revival of class struggle, revolutionaries are unavoidably faced with the challenge of developing tactics which will enable them to gain a hearing from workers, so as to win their confidence. Small groups, whether of a few dozen or even a few hundred, cannot, under most circumstances, pose as a direct and immediate alternative to the mass reformist or Stalinist parties, except to small numbers of the most advanced militants. Still less are they in a position to propose party-to-party united fronts.

However, revolutionaries *can* draw upon the range of tactics derived from the united front by raising demands upon the mass organisations and their leaders, initiating common actions (eg against racists and fascists), fighting for principled trade union unity, developing campaigns of critical electoral support, operating 'the lever of a small group' through the united front from within, etc – in short, applying the broad scope of what can collectively be termed *united front policy*. Party building, if it is not to be reduced to a sectarian caricature, must undergo a further period of preparatory work, in which the arsenal of revolutionary tactics must be renewed and relearned.

The ingrained tendency of a large proportion of the left to substitute either pseudo-revolutionary phrase-mongering or chronic opportunism in place of serious, patient and genuinely revolutionary work must be firmly rejected. This in turn requires the clarification of a wide range of misconceptions.

Is any common action a united front?

Wrenched out of context, some of Trotsky's statements in his German writings would appear to justify such a position (i.e. that the united front arises from the simplest joint action). However, Trotsky was not discussing the question in general, but joint action between two mass parties – the largest social democratic party and the largest communist party in Europe.

The danger of applying the term united front to, for instance, common actions between several small revolutionary or centrist groups is precisely that this mass aspect is forgotten, and those involved short-circuit the struggle for influence

over the mass organisations of the class, while believing they have paid their revolutionary respects to the united front.

There will, of course, be many occasions in which only relatively small numbers of leftists will rally to a given campaign or struggle around fighting demands (e.g. the campaign against the Gulf War). To avoid the term united front does not in any way detract from the principled character of such campaigns, which should be seen as one of the variants of common action. However, under such conditions, revolutionaries seek to broaden the struggle beyond the confines of small-circle politics, and carry the fight into the mass organisations of the class.

Common actions, again of a principled nature, are possible even with sections of the bourgeoisie around questions of democratic rights such as freedom of the press, opposition to repressive legislation, equal rights for women, gays, lesbians etc. Thus, while it is conceivable to imagine a demonstration involving both workers' parties and a liberal bourgeois party, it is would be wholly wrong to term such an action a united front.

Is the united front a workers-only united front?

The term workers united front was frequently used by the Comintem, and in the 1920s was used very largely around the axis of the inter-relations between mass workers' parties, and to a lesser extent their influence over unorganised sections of workers. However, this does not exhaust the question, since the problem remains of how the tactic relates to other non-proletarian and semi-proletarian oppressed strata of modem capitalism. To answer the question requires first of all to think concretely. If, for instance, a student union, an organisation of small shopkeepers or an ethnic minority community organisation wished to affiliate to an anti-fascist committee alongside representatives of the major social democratic party, smaller leftist groups and the trade unions, and accepted its discipline, then only the sheerest formalist would oppose it joining, on the grounds that it was not a bona fide workers' organisation. In this case, the affiliation would signify that a section of the oppressed petty bourgeoisie had accepted the leadership of the working class. Similar considerations apply to small farmers in some countries.

If however representatives of an openly bourgeois party joined such a committee in order to subvert it, break up its fighting capacity and subordinate it to a programme of capitalist law and order and reliance on the state, then its character as a united front would have been destroyed. There will of course be intermediate situations between these two poles. But, in one way or another, the question will be answered on the plane of action. It cannot be answered solely in terms of sociology, but rather by determining which class interests are ultimately served.

The United Front – Tactic or Strategy?

Since it is impossible for the revolutionary party to take power except through the support of the majority of politically conscious workers, the distinction between strategy and tactics is clearly not absolute. Without correct tactics, strategic questions will not be posed concretely.

Yet, the united front is frequently referred to as 'merely' a tactic. Aside from the fact that workers will not be won over by something which looks simply like a manoeuvre and not a serious commitment to united action, a larger issue concerns the means by which the working class takes power.

In 1917, the Bolsheviks defeated Kornilov by means of joint action with Mensheviks and SRs, took power on the mandate of the soviets, and formed a coalition government with the Left SRs. All three phases were examples of the united front. In *What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat*, Trotsky calls for the struggle 'through the united front – to the soviets as the highest organs of the united front'.

Naturally this does not mean that we should fetishise soviets – or, worse still, imitation soviets – under conditions where other forms of working class organisation arise. Nor does it mean that every united front struggle poses the question of power directly. However, the more developed the struggle, the greater its collective consciousness, the more it moves onto the offensive – the more directly united front tactics are invested with strategic implications.

However, it is also true that those (eg the Lambertists) who have emphasised the united front as an over-arching strategy have frequently given it an opportunist thrust, to the extent that it becomes a form of organic unity with social democracy. The united front with reformists and Stalinists becomes meaningless when they sabotage action and disorganise the class. The failure to call things by their real names under such conditions (eg the Anglo-Russian Committee after the British General Strike) and to break if necessary from the united front amounts to covering the backs of the bureaucracy.

Is entrism a form of the united front?

In 1934, Trotsky urged the French Trotskyists of the Communist League to concretise their propaganda for the united front by entering the Socialist Party (the 'French turn'). He wrote:

This programme [of the reformist and Stalinist bureaucrats] can be realised practically only because the League remains isolated from the masses. The attempt to skim over this isolation through an exchange of diplomatic notes with the Central Committee or through attendance at the sessions of the Socialist National Council is nothing but diplomatic horseplay that aims to conceal the unfavourable relationship of forces. That is not at all worthy of us. The relationship of forces has to be changed, not concealed. It is necessary to go to the masses. It is necessary to find a place for oneself within the framework of the united front, ie, within the framework of one of the two parties of which it is composed. In actual practice, that means within the framework of the SFIO. [8]

And again:

The League must take an organic place in the ranks of the united front. It is too weak to claim an *independent* place. That is as much to say that it must immediately take a place in one of the two parties that have negotiated the agreement. [9]

Naturally, this does not mean that *any* work in a reformist, centrist or Stalinist milieu constitutes revolutionary united front activity. Routine, adaptationist work of the type which the USec has carried out in a number of countries over the years, frequently serves only to strengthen the left reformist wing of the bureaucracy. Only by linking propaganda wherever possible with deeds, only by linking immediate tasks with transitional demands, can this form of united front policy avoid such pitfalls. In this way, revolutionaries seek, within the framework of a single party, to put the reformist bureaucrats beyond what is 'possible', and 'catch them in the crossfire' when they fail to deliver.

Is it permissible for revolutionaries to 'tactically' enter popular fronts?

The Popular (or People's) Front is a particular from of class collaboration. Popular Fronts – at least those that attain any significance – aim to create a cross-class coalition government, in which the interests of the working class are subordinated to the 'progressive' / 'democratic' / 'anti-fascist' / 'anti-imperialist' bourgeoisie. Because such formations are fundamentally opposed to working class independence, revolutionaries cannot place any confidence in, or endorse their aims.

But this general principle does not exhaust the question of revolutionary tactics, particularly where a popular front gains hegemony over the working class and its organisations. Indeed, it is typical, that where a popular front gains mass support (eg France and Spain 1936, the UDF in South Africa), its footsoldiers are predominantly, or overwhelmingly, proletarian.

Trotsky's response to such a situation was not to advocate dead-end boycott, but to seek to alter the balance of forces in the direction of the united front:

> For the moment, the People's Front is a fact (not for long). Our slogan must be something like: 'Bourgeois politicians out of the People's Front! The popular masses have nothing to learn from the capitulator Daladier! Down with the Radical betrayers of the popular masses,' etc., etc., All the possible variants. Perhaps a formulation like this could be used: 'To turn the People's Front against the bourgeoisie, it is necessary to get the bourgeoisie out of the People's Front.'

He also advocated practical methods of counterposing the base to the leadership:

> Each two hundred, five hundred, or one thousand citizens adhering to the People's Front in a given city, district, factory, barrack, and village should in time of fighting actions elect their representative to the local committee of action. All the participants in the struggle are bound by its discipline.

Does this mean that a revolutionary organisation should therefore join a popular front? It should go without saying that as revolutionary Marxists we do not endorse class collaboration, whether in the form of affiliation, signing a declaration of aims, or in any other way which signifies an endorsement in principle of the aims of popular fronts. However, since we do not turn our backs on the working class when it is misled, we do not leave mass organisations which are affiliated to popular fronts (eg workers' parties, trade unions, community organisations etc) – unless, of course, we have mass support. Instead, we argue for class politics within the structures of the alliance, and use them wherever possible as a tribune to reorient the mass following of the popular front. Nor do we withhold critical electoral support from workers' parties in popular fronts. Rather, we seek by means of agitation around critical support to force the leaders to break with the bourgeoisie.

Revolutionaries do not politically support under any conditions a popular front government, although they may critically support individual measures it takes (eg nationalisation). They would however defend a popular front against attempts to remove it by right wing reaction.

In relation to campaigns which are not governmental-style popular fronts, but which nevertheless employ a popular frontist methodology – for example, Stalinist-inspired 'peace' movements – we seek to intervene, where relevant, without dropping our intransigent opposition to cross-class unity.

Is the United Front possible with a non-proletarian party?

Such a scenario is only possible in relatively few circumstances – normally where a petty bourgeois or bourgeois nationalist party has a mass base in the working class, and particularly where it has the allegiance of the trade unions. Even so, it will only be applicable in certain cases – for instance, where such a party has a base in soviets or workers' councils (eg the SRs in September 1917); or where the proletarian rank and file is directly threatened by reactionary violence (eg local units of the ANC during the township wars; republicans in the north of Ireland.) A further possibility is where a petty bourgeois radical party such as the Greens in West Germany in the early 1980s attracts significant working class support by outflanking the traditional bourgeois workers' party to the left.

No ready-made recipe exists in such situations. The acid test is whether the petty bourgeois party is prepared (temporarily and in spite of itself!) to fight in practice for demands which assist the struggle of the working class.

Does the United Front defend democracy?

Bourgeois democracy, military dictatorship and fascism are all forms of capitalist rule. Marxists, unlike reformists and Stalinists, do not draw absolute distinctions between these different forms, but rather show their interconnectedness – how one prepares for another. But, since the form of rule can vitally affect the interests of the working class and its organisations, this does not signify indifference either. Replying to the question whether he defended the Weimar Republic, Trotsky distinguished between its various components: the president (who had called the fascists to power); the government (already headed by Hitler); the Reichstag (with a majority of reactionaries); and the 'elements of proletarian democracy' – the workers' political, trade union and cultural organisations – which had grown up within bourgeois democracy. It was the latter genuine communists defended, but 'as we do not yet have the strength to establish the soviet system, we place ourselves on the terrain of bourgeois democracy', without having any illusions in it.

If this seems rather arcane, a clearer example is provided by the Kapp Putsch in March 1920. The KPD, dominated, in the absence of Levi, by the left headed by Thalheimer, issued a proclamation which stated that workers 'will not move a finger for the democratic Republic'; the party was prepared to fight militarism, but 'this moment has not yet come'.

But the mass of the working class and even big sections of the middle class responded to the call from SPD-led trade unions, backed by the SPD, the USPD and the Democratic Party, for a general strike against the militarist threat. The KPD, after a day's delay, was forced to change its line, and support the call – or risk political oblivion. The first demand of workers after the putsch had collapsed was removal of Noske – the head of the government they had just 'defended' – and two other ministers also known to have collaborated with the Freikorps.

The lesson to be drawn is clear. In 'defending' bourgeois democracy, the working class does not defend the state which oppresses it; nor does it place confidence in the system of

capitalist exploitation, whatever its coloration. Where it does have a direct interest is in defending its own democratic rights, which exist within the bourgeois-democratic framework, but which would be immediately threatened by militarist or fascist counter-revolution. Abstentionism on this score will always prove disastrous. Having defeated the main and immediate enemy, it resumes the struggle against the bourgeois republic. Moreover, even in the heat of such 'defensive' actions, revolutionaries fight for the political independence of their class, rather than its subordination to bourgeois democracy. The working class must intervene as an independent detachment, prepared to take the struggle beyond the confines the bourgeois democrats seek to place upon it.

Is a military bloc the same as the united front?

The KPD, dominated, in the absence of Levi, by the left headed by Thalheimer (above), issued a proclamation which stated that workers 'will not move a finger for the democratic Republic'; the party was prepared to fight militarism, but 'this moment has not yet come'.

The scope for a military bloc 'with the devil and his grandmother' is considerably wider than the criteria of the united front. A military bloc does not presuppose the ability of the 'partner' of the working class to defend workers' interests, even to a limited extent. It merely amounts to an agreement to fire in the same direction against a common enemy. In the case of an attempted coup, such an agreement could be concluded with sections of the bourgeoisie, or even with 'loyal' army units. But to talk of a 'united front' with such forces would be ridiculous.

Along such lines we have argued that, while a military bloc with Yeltsin and his supporters would have been appropriate had the August Coup developed into a civil war, there could have been no united front with a restorationist government bent on the destruction of the workers' state. Even to pose the question of joint struggle to defend wages, jobs etc to such a government reveals its lack of realism.

Must reformism be moving to the left for the united front to be posed?

This 'condition' placed on critical electoral support – and therefore on the united front – by groups such as the RKL (Austria) and the Spartacists is in fact a means of excluding a united front policy. The desire for class unity – on which the united front is based – normally arises when workers are under attack and thrust on to the defensive. It is the contradiction between the desire of the reformist rank and file to defend itself and the unwillingness of the reformist leaders to fight which gives the united front its leverage. Therefore to apply the united front only in periods when reformism is 'naturally' and 'organically' evolving to the left means in practice to block any means for the mass of the class to move from the defensive on to the offensive.

Least of all can such ultimatism be applied by small groups:

Let us for a moment transfer the problem to Great Britain, where the Communist Party (as a consequence of the ruinous mistakes of Stalinist bureaucracy) still comprises an insignificant portion of the proletariat. If one accepts the theory that every type of the united front, except the Communist, is 'counter-revolutionary', then obviously the British proletariat must put off its revolutionary struggle until that time when the Communist Party is able to come to the fore. But the Communist Party cannot come to the front of the class except on the basis of its own revolutionary experience. However, its experience cannot take on a revolutionary character in any other way than by drawing mass millions into the struggle. Yet non-Communist masses, the more so if organised, cannot be drawn into the struggle except through the policy of the united front. We fall into a vicious circle, from which there is no way out by means of bureaucratic ultimatism. Leon Trotsky, What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat (1932).

AGAINST SECTARIANISM AND OPPORTUNISM!

Ultimatist versions of the united front are invariably linked to voluntarist notions of party building – the urge to command the masses without participating in their struggles. Such a method can only build a smaller or larger sect, and ultimately breed cynicism or demoralisation when workers fail to respond.

Opportunist versions of the united front on the other hand avoid at all costs clear criticism of their reformist or Stalinist partners in the interests of unity. In this way, not a few 'Trotskyists' have ended up as bag carriers for left reformists, building a small centrist periphery, which acts as a ready-made audience and support group. This is a recipe for a propaganda bloc on reformism's terms.

Between, on the one hand, a haughty contempt for the working class, its concerns and the inner life of its organisations, and on the other, a cringing attempt to become the most consistent reformists, united front policy must be re-established as a crucial weapon in the Trotskyist arsenal.

LTT, 10 April 1995

Notes

1. K. Marx and F. Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, Lawrence and Wishart, 1976. p. 497.
2. *Revolutionary History* Vol. 2, No. 3, Autumn 1989, p. 4.
3. *Ibid*, p. 4.
4. See N. Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism – an Infantile Disorder*, any edition.
5. L. Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. 2, New Park, 1973, pp. 93-4.
6. *Ibid*, p. 92.
7. See O. Hippe, *And Red is the Colour of Our Flag*, Index, 1991, chapter 9.
8. L. Trotsky, 'The League Faced with a Decisive Turn', in *Writings 1934-35*, Pathfinder, 1971, p. 35-6.
9. *Ibid*, p. 42.